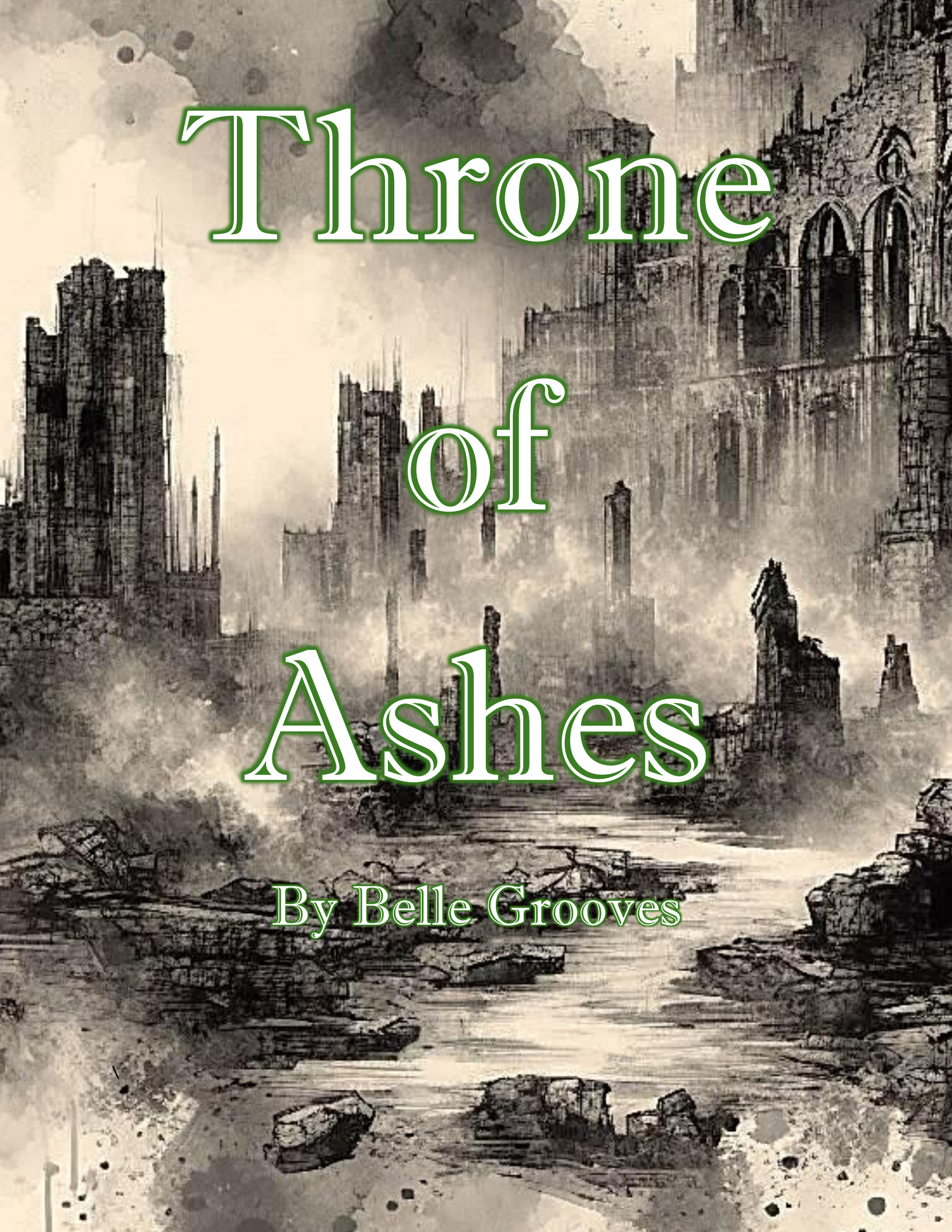
Throne of Ashes

Belle Graves


Throne
of
Ashes
By Belle Grooves

For me that is invincible.

CHAPTER ONE

Precisely one month had gone by after the morning I was crowned king, and precisely nothing had changed. Well, perhaps that's stretching the truth a little. Plenty had changed, just nothing terribly noticeable. I mean, my injury from the Weyannorian War (something the villagers continued calling it. It got stuck in my head after a while and so now that's what everyone calls it. Whatever.) had healed nicely, leaving behind nothing except a pale scar against my already pale skin. Yes, I had been outdoors plenty since the war, walking with my sister or speaking with my people or whatever else it was I needed to be doing, but no matter the amount of herbal tea Wisteria provided me with, the Tinnober illness stuck.

I had been informed recently that the gold I'd sent to Tinnober had been put to good use rebuilding houses and making it easier for them to get what they needed. The illness, the plague, had finally been contained and there were few who still had the ailment. I—lucky me—was one of those few, as previously mentioned. My illness didn't seem to affect anyone else, so it was decided that I wasn't contagious and therefore allowed to roam as I pleased. You shouldn't worry about it though; I'm certainly not. My only symptoms were a slight chill and a cough. That's excluding the pallor of my skin, but I never was particularly tan anyway.

I think that's enough about me though. My country wasn't in great condition. The entire western side had been burnt to shambles. Ashes still drifted halfheartedly through the stale air and rebuilding was slow. We had already discovered more people than I cared to admit under collapsed buildings and there was a general stench that wafted through that part of the city. I was met daily with people begging me to do something about it, though not even they could tell me what it was I needed so desperately to do. I had already given several hundred people jobs in my castle to make a living and provide for their families. I had graciously given gold to many of the people who had lost their homes and families. I'd given fifty men enough gold to gather ample supplies and use them to build a place for the homeless and orphaned to stay, but even that was nearly overflowing. I had sent probably close to two thirds of the population to the northern and eastern cities of Feruneth, praying they might find a place to stay elsewhere. Hundreds of my people had gone to stay in Weyannor, as their king, Seabert, was an old friend of mine and more generous than I had given him credit for. A few desperate

souls had gone to Tinnober, even before the plague was gone. I was losing faith in my country's ability to keep thriving. Now, I know Feruneth was rich in both land and gold, and I was making the absolute most of those things. I had men building houses and places to stay twenty-four-seven in the empty farmlands, and I had spent thousands worth of our gold to provide for my people. None of that seemed to be enough though. The people never stopped coming and they never stopped asking questions and they never stopped begging. There was little in the world that I hated more than begging.

My mornings were filled with the same routine: Endless meetings with advisors, each one more disheartening than the last. They brought reports of progress on rebuilding efforts, but all I could focus on were the setbacks. "More resources needed," they would say, their voices monotonous as though they had rehearsed before coming to me. "We need more gold, more laborers." It was always more, never enough.

The day Ambrose approached me with dissatisfactory news was no exception. I was standing outside the castle, watching as the sun set and cast long shadows across the grounds. I was entirely lost in thought, thinking of my coming marriage, when the sound of heavy footsteps pulled me back to reality. My head advisor and close friend, Ambrose Cohen, approached and stood by my side. I felt my heart sink when I saw that his brows were pressed together.

"Theo," he began, weariness in his tone. "We need to discuss the situation in the west. There are more reports of unrest among the people. They're growing uneasy, and some are even calling for your resignation."

I hadn't expected him to say anything different, no matter how much I wished it were otherwise. "What do they expect me to resign from? The throne or my obligation to them? I'm doing everything I can, Ambrose," I snapped.

"They see only the ashes, my king. They see their homes burned and their families buried. They want action, not sympathy. We really must do something more drastic."

"And what do you suggest? What else can I possibly do? I have given everything they asked for whether gold, a job, or a place to stay. If they cannot find peace in that, then what more can I offer them? My blood? My life?"

Ambrose rolled his eyes. He'd been spending far too much time with Amadeus. I'd have to speak with Amadeus about turning Ambrose into his clone. "They want a leader who can make things

right, a king who will restore what was lost. You need to show them that you're that king, Theo. You need to unite them. I'm talking about more than just giving them gold. You need to do something about it."

I gritted my teeth against a sudden wave of nausea and breathed a sigh. "I will not resort to tyranny or empty displays of power," I muttered.

"I'm not suggesting that you do, my king, but you need to be present. Don't simply sit on your throne and have everyone else fix things. That isn't going to do anything good for you. They need to see you and you need to make them understand that you are doing everything you can." He paused for a moment. "Perhaps a meeting in the town square? Gather them together, reassure them of their grievances directly. They simply want to know you care."

I thought about his offer before coming to the obvious conclusion that neither of us would follow through with. So, I agreed with him to appease him. "Fine, Ambrose, I'll do it. However, if they throw things at me, I'm holding you accountable."

He grinned. "Fantastic. I'll make arrangements."

He gave me a quick bow and left, but I heard footsteps that weren't his walking toward me. I knew who they belonged to, and I didn't bother turning around to see the man. There was only one person who walked like they were about to tell me off for existing. I sighed as he drew nearer, not wanting to hear his concern or anything of the sort. I was beginning to grow tired of his incessance. It wasn't as if I was dying before his eyes; I was just sick. It barely even impeded my fighting skills or my ability to fall while trying to get on a horse. As you may know, I'm not a tall person. Amadeus is over a head taller than I am—most people are—and my shortness hindered my ability to mount a horse properly. I'd tried plenty of times to fling myself over the saddle using my body weight, but with my recent illness, I was too light even for that. After the war, Amadeus insisted on giving me mounting lessons, though it did little to improve my nonexistent skills.

I sighed and spoke before the man had a chance to open his mouth. "Amadeus, I have told you countless times that I understand your concern for me, but Ria is doing everything she can, and it honestly isn't a hindrance. I'm fine. I swear it."

"I'm not here to talk about your deteriorating health, my king. Your sister wanted to tell you goodnight and she was insistent that I bring her to you."

I turned to him after those words and smiled at my sister in his arms. Liesel was only five, and she was beautiful. I brushed a few of her dark curls from her glistening blue eyes and took her in my arms. I kissed her cheek, holding her close. "Goodnight, love. I'll see you in the morning."

She wrapped her little arms around my neck and sighed contentedly. "Theo, I can't sleep without your song. Please sing for me. Please?"

I looked at her seriously. "Lici, I've sung you that song three times today alone. Isn't that enough? Why don't you just rest tonight, and I'll sing it to you in the morning."

"Please, Theo? Please, please, pleeeeease?"

Amadeus snorted softly beside me, and I set her down. "All right. I'll sing it as soon as I come inside. Go with a guard to your room and wait for me, okay? I'll be up there soon."

Lici grinned at me and took the hand of a guard standing at the castle gate, leading him away to my old room that she had insisted on keeping as her own. Wisteria stayed in my sister's former room, and I slept in my parents' room upon Ambrose and Amadeus's forceful suggestion. I watched Lici saunter away, noting the guard's bemused glance over his shoulder at me, and then I leaned against the castle wall when they were out of sight.

"Ambrose is making arrangements for me to speak with my people in the town square," I muttered. "He thinks it'll be good for them to see me do something for them instead of sitting in the castle doing nothing."

Amadeus lifted an eyebrow. "Does he think you haven't been doing anything?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I just think he thinks I'm tired of giving everyone the same answers. My people are sick of it, I'm sure. He's trying to help, but I doubt it'll do anything except make them angrier with me."

"They aren't angry with you, Theo. They're angry with the situation and angry that things won't happen on their own in a timely fashion. They respect you as their king."

I turned away from him, shifting my gaze to the fading sun. "You of all people should refrain from lying to my face, Amadeus. Perhaps they loosely respected me a week after the war, but a month has gone by and still there is smoke and ashes in the whole western part of my country. Scarcely anyone lives there, and it's apparently getting difficult to breathe the air as well. My country is dying, and

my people with it."

Amadeus looked at me and I could feel his disappointed eyes on me. "Don't you think that's a little dramatic, Theo? You sound depressed, and I know you aren't. You've a wedding to look forward to and a best man to decide on. Don't be so glum all the time."

I scowled. "I'm not glum, I'm tired, and Ria won't marry me until I'm well."

Amadeus turned my head toward him and studied my eyes, frowning deeply. "I know you've heard this before, but she isn't wrong. You aren't exactly the picture of health, my king. Have you slept at all aside from those two and a half days in the throne?"

"Yes, of course I have. A few hours here and there." I coughed softly. "Before you ask, I've eaten plenty. I'm fine, and I drink Ria's tea every night. Honestly, you're making my illness a much bigger deal than it really is."

I saw the archer glance down at my empty hands and shake his head. "You aren't drinking the tea now."

"I realize that. I'll drink it when I go inside." I pulled my cloak tighter around myself. "Amadeus, I—"

I was interrupted by the guard who had escorted Lici. He bowed before addressing me directly. "King Theophilus, the princess sent me to ask you to please come and sing to her."

I nodded and thanked the man, dismissing him. I turned on my heel for the castle, but Amadeus took my arm. "What were you going to say?"

"When?"

"Before that guard came. You were about to say something."

"I should go. Lici won't wait forever."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Theo, I thought you weren't going to lie to me anymore."

I pulled away from his grasp. "Later, Amadeus. I'll tell you later."

He released me and blew out a frustrated breath, though I knew his frustrations didn't really lie with me. They lay with the situation and with the plague itself. He knew there was nothing that could be done to rid my body of it, and that, more than anything I think, bothered and worried him. It was safe to say it bothered me, but I was certainly not worried about it. I didn't believe it was anything detrimental, so I dealt with it as best I could.

"I'm not going to argue with you about this anymore, so just tell me what you were going to say." I cocked an eyebrow and waited for him to finish. He glared at me. "Please."

"I might sound like I'm complaining and being bratty. Are you sure you still want to hear it?"

"I've heard you complain before. Just tell me."

"All right, fine. The tea Ria makes for me, I don't think it's doing anything anymore. I keep . . . Well, I can't keep it down, and Wisteria still won't agree to marry me until the plague is gone." I shrugged tiredly and gave him a small smile. "At this rate, I might be waiting a while."

"The tea's never been a miracle cure, Theo. It takes time." He studied my expression and patted my shoulder. "Wisteria isn't going anywhere, my friend. Give her time and she'll come around. She loves you. When she does change her mind, then you'll be ready."

I turned back toward the castle and began to walk inside. I glanced back over my shoulder at the bowman and sighed. "Thank you, Amadeus, but . . . I don't think any amount of persuasion will change her mind." I began to walk inside the castle again, but I paused a second time. "Whenever you come inside, send Isaiah to my room with Ria's tea, please. I need to speak with him. You should come too, and so should Ambrose. When they leave, I'd like to have a private word with you aside from the words we just exchanged. There's no rush. I'll be awake for a while." I turned to really look at him. "Thank you."

I did finally go into the castle, heading for my sister's room. I thought about stopping and asking a guard to sing for her so I could sleep, but I knew the way she might react to that, and I didn't want to upset her. Lici was . . . Admittedly a little spoiled. Most of that, mind you, was entirely because of Mother. My sister just had a way of looking at you that made you want to say yes because if you didn't say yes, her heart would break in two and it would be entirely your fault. I didn't want her to hold that over me, so I rarely said no to her. I supposed things were going to need to change because I couldn't sing to her every night. I could hardly sing without coughing anyway, but she didn't mind. She knew I was sick; she simply wasn't particularly concerned with my health. Oh well.

I dragged myself up the stairs and pushed open the door to my old room, seeing her face light up with delight the moment she saw me. I gave her a tired smile and sat beside her on the bed, dismissing the guard to stand outside the door. I always had a guard outside her door. She'd been stolen from me once, and I could not let that happen again. I pulled the massive blanket over her and draped the soft, red blanket she had insisted on keeping over that one. She smiled up at

me and I leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"All right, Lici. Sleep tight, love. I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

She grabbed my sleeve and sat up a little. "You can't leave yet, Theo. You promised you would sing me your song."

"Of course. How could I ever forget?"

She relaxed. "Thank you, Theo."

I sighed softly and brushed the curls from her face. "Okay. Just listen, all right? No talking or interrupting.

"Hush, my love, the night is near,
Moonlight whispers, soft and clear.
Stars are watching from above,
Cradling you in their love.
Close your eyes, let dreams take flight,
Through the quiet, gentle night.
Winds will sing a tender tune,
Guided by the silver moon.
Sleep, my love, till morning's light,
I'll be with you through the night.
In your dreams, so warm and bright,
I'll keep you safe till dawn's first light."

I stayed beside her for a moment after I finished singing, to make sure she wasn't going to wake up and beg me to sing it again. Thankfully, she was sound asleep. I stood and blew out the candle by her bed, pulling the door open and nodding gratefully to the guard by her door. I went downstairs and passed the door to Wisteria's room, briefly wondering whether I should try to persuade her to marry me tonight, but I knew already what her answer would be. I walked past her room to the throne room and continued until I reached the door to my late mother and father's chamber. I had removed all the pictures from the walls and had their clothes given away to people who actually needed them, but aside from that nothing had changed. The furniture was all in the same place, the walls were all the same white with pale blue floral designs stretching from floor to ceiling. I had changed nothing aside from removing the pictures that I had no desire to see.

I unfastened my cloak and let it fall to the floor as I sat on the edge of my bed, waiting for Isaiah to bring me the distasteful tea. I dreaded drinking that stuff every night because I knew that I would gag it back out. It was nothing short of disrelishing. It was useless, and honestly, I was beginning to think it might be worsening my ailment. It absolutely wasn't curing the illness inside me. The illness

wasn't simply staying the same as it was to begin with, so I figured the only thing that could be making it get worse was drinking the tea. It didn't matter that the tea didn't stay down, I'd been drinking it for a month now and it had to be having some sort of effect. One that I didn't particularly think was good for my health.

I fell back on my bed and breathed a tired sigh. Amadeus was right about what he'd said before. I was tired, exhausted really. I hadn't slept any more than those two and a half days in the throne, missing my own celebration entirely. I had slept a few hours here and there, but I hadn't really gotten a full night of sleep since the war. I knew part of that was because of the stupid plague, and I also knew that the other part was my own doing because I was stressed about things that shouldn't have worried me at all. I worried about something happening to Lici when I knew she was perfectly safe. I worried about Amadeus or Ambrose getting hurt when I knew there was no danger of any sort of war happening anytime soon. I was worried about Wisteria because what if I never got well? Did that mean she would never marry me? I knew that was ridiculous, but that didn't mean I could stop my mind from worrying about silly things on repeat. I probably should have listened to Amadeus about getting more sleep, but I just couldn't. Sleeping was way easier said than done.

I must have drifted off for a short time because when I sat up and rubbed my eyes, Isaiah had come in—without my consent, I might add—and was setting a cup of tea that smelled strongly of herbs on the table beside my bed. I breathed a thanks to him and took the warm cup in my hands, breathing in the bitter scent. I took a small sip before really turning toward the young man before me. I acknowledged his bow with a brief nod and set the cup down.

"Isaiah, I understand there have been . . . Shindies in both the western cities of my country and the eastern cities. Ambrose informed me this evening that some of my people were asking for my resignation, presumably from the throne. Is all of that correct?"

My captain of the guard nodded. "I'm afraid so, King Theophilus. There are several people who call for you to resign and step down, even though they admit they respected you after the Weyannorian War. I have several of my men taking care of things in the eastern cities. The people in the western cities, namely Lirveth and Sovanth, are a little agitated and I have only a couple men down there because, well, there isn't much they can destroy. If you have anything you'd like me to do, I can certainly have my men carry it

out or do it myself."

I rose to my feet and took another sip of Ria's rather distasteful beverage. "Unless things get worse and people really start, I don't know, rioting or something crazy like that, there isn't anything more you can do. Thank you, Isaiah, for everything you've done. I really do appreciate your loyalty." I took another sip and winced at the nasty taste. "Did you happen to see Amadeus and Ambrose anywhere in the castle before you came to see me?"

Isaiah shook his head. "Aside from Amadeus sending me with the tea, no. I didn't see him again and I haven't seen Ambrose at all. Why? Should I go look for them?"

I shrugged. "They're probably fine. I just asked Amadeus to find Ambrose and come see me, but apparently, he ignored me. Nothing out of the ordinary. If you do happen to see Amadeus, tell him I would like to see him before the night is done, and perhaps imply that he shouldn't take any more scenic routes. I want to speak with him about something, and I would prefer to do it sooner rather than later."

Isaiah gave me a low bow. "If that's all, good evening, my king."

I drank the rest of the tea and handed him the empty cup. "Yes, that's all. Thank you for coming."

He nodded and left me alone, where I sat back on my bed and fought the urge to be sick. I really didn't think that tea could be doing anything if I kept throwing it back up. I lay back on my bed and stared at the ceiling for a long time. I wasn't really thinking about anything in particular, rather a bit of everything. After a few moments of staring pointlessly, I let my eyes close and stayed there, praying I might finally get some worthwhile rest.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt a light touch on my arm. I leapt out of bed, my hand instantly finding the hilt of my sword. I scanned the room and sighed when I realized it was only Amadeus and Ambrose. I relaxed and then I felt the blood drain from my face, a sensation that was becoming far too familiar. Before anyone said anything, I held up a hand and went to the latrine, leaning over and emptying my stomach of all the awful tea I had only consumed minutes earlier. I took a breath when I was done and drank the glass of water I had been keeping in my room as of late. I returned to the bed and sat heavily on it, wiping my hands down my face resignedly.

"Ambrose, I trust you have a date for the meeting?" I asked.

I noticed the concern in his gray eyes. "I . . . Yes. I arranged it

for next week. If that's all right with you, I can have things further prepared and let your people know."

"Yes, that's fine. I'm thinking of going down to Lirveth and Sovanth soon, to see how everything is going. Isaiah said he's got men down there, but I want to speak with the people."

"I don't know if that's a good idea, Theo. They aren't really . . . Honoring you. They've assigned themselves a new king and they call themselves Lirvanth. It would be perhaps wise for you to rest here in the castle and stay away from them."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What do you think they're going to do, Ambrose? Tell me how much they hate me? I won't see or hear anything I haven't already seen or heard. You're acting like they're going to kill me on the spot, which is ridiculous. I'll have my own sword with me." I rose to my feet and dismissed him with a gesture toward the door. "Thank you, Ambrose, but I don't need to rest. I need to make my people see sense before they destroy the rest of my country. I would prefer to not have to rebuild an entire country. Good evening."

He shook his head at me but let it go and walked out the door, leaving me alone with the archer. I glanced over at him where he leaned against the wall with crossed arms and let out a heavy sigh. I found a chair to sit in while I waited for him to say something to me. I certainly wasn't going to offer anything.

"I was under the impression that you had something to say to me, not the other way around."

"I do have something to say to you, many somethings, but I might as well hear what you have to say first. And don't tell me you have nothing to say."

He looked at me. "You aren't getting better."

"I am aware of that."

"That's not what I mean." Amadeus came closer and touched my forehead with his cold fingers, something he'd been doing a lot lately. "You always have a fever, you're always cold, you're pale and frankly, I think you look worse than you did after the war."

"That's very kind of you," I muttered dully.

"I don't think you have the plague, my king," Amadeus said softly. "I think if you had the plague, the tea would have cured you as it has cured everyone else. Also, you haven't infected anyone else. Perhaps you had the plague to begin with, but I do not believe you have it now."

"Then what do I have? What could I possibly have that isn't

going away and that is only getting worse? Such an illness does not exist, Amadeus, and if it did, then why I am the only person with that illness?" I let out a tired breath. "That doesn't make any sense at all. In fact, it makes less sense than me simply having the plague even after everyone else is already cured of it."

"I don't know, but I do think that if it was just the plague, you would not still look so . . . Well, the way you look. It's awful. You look terrible, Theo."

I frowned and coughed lightly. "It isn't that big of a deal, Amadeus. You're making it seem more than it is. I'm sure it'll pass and I'm sure it's just the plague like it's always been."

"I don't think so, and I think you know that too. You just aren't accepting the truth of the matter, as per usual."

"Fine. I'll indulge you. If it isn't the plague, then what else might it be?"

"I can't say I have an answer for that question, but I do have my suspicions. None of them I will tell you until I am certain one of them is true, but this isn't the plague, Theo. You must surely know that."

I rubbed my eyes and returned to my bed, leaning back against the pillows. "I do know that. At least, the logical part of me knows that, but the other part of me, the part that wants everything to be simpler, doesn't believe that. If it was just the plague, then I would know that the tea would work eventually because it worked for everyone else. Therefore, it would have to work for me at some point in my life. Hopefully that would be before I died. On the other hand, if it isn't the plague, which is seemingly more and more likely the longer I'm around you, that means I have absolutely no idea what it is or how to cure it or really anything important about the stupid illness at all." I closed my eyes and took a breath. "You know, Amadeus, every time I'm around you, you always make things worse somehow," I muttered.

He shrugged. "I'm only telling you what I believe to be true."

"That is exactly my point. Your truth and blatant honesty are making everything worse."

My man-at-arms sat down in the chair I had previously occupied and looked at me with a disfavoring expression in his eyes. For a time, there was silence, and I wondered whether he was waiting for me to say something more or whether he was simply waiting for something else. What that thing might have been, I did not know, but I respected the silence and said nothing because I had

nothing else to say.

"Theo. I am not making anything worse by telling you the truth. The only thing making things worse is yourself. You often make things worse, if I'm being honest. You disagree with me only because you don't want to believe that it's something else, because you think if it's the plague then things will be easier for you. Perhaps that is true. If it is the plague, it would make things easier for you, probably much easier than I suspect they're going to be. However, we both know that your illness has nothing to do with the plague." He paused for a moment and leaned closer, looking at me rather seriously. "If you want to know what I think is wrong, then I will tell you, but you aren't going to like what I have to say. You don't usually like what I have to say, but you especially won't like this."

"I suppose I should hear it regardless of what I think, and you would probably tell me anyway, so just say it."

"Okay." He took a breath before continuing.

CHAPTER TWO

"I think you're being poisoned, Theo."

I lifted an eyebrow. "By whom?"

"I haven't thought that far and I'm not positive you *are* being poisoned. It's just a thought."

I exhaled slowly and looked at the bowman intently before speaking softly. "You honestly believe that to be true?"

"I do, and I can have Seabert come to Feruneth and see you himself. I'm sure, as a former assassin, he's seen the effects plenty of times before."

"Amadeus—"

"Then again, I'm sure Captain Edevane will have some idea as well, being an assassin under Seabert for a time."

"Amadeus, I—"

"In any case, you should get some sleep."

"Amadeus, be quiet and listen to me for a moment. Please." I glared at him and waited until he was leaning back in the chair, ready to listen. "I still think it's the plague and I think you're overthinking it. People get sick. It happens." He didn't respond, just kept watching me with a maddeningly calm expression. I turned away. "We don't need Seabert, and we don't need Isaiah. It isn't poison." Still, he was silent. I clenched my jaw, biting back a few curses before exhaling slowly. "If you're that determined, fine. Have Seabert come. Let him look at me. Perhaps then you'll stop with this absurd idea."

Amadeus smirked at me, something I did not appreciate. "You won't regret it, I swear."

I scowled at him. "I already do."

I closed my eyes and leaned farther back in the bed, sinking deeper into the pillows. I knew that Amadeus's words were entirely ludicrous. They were completely crazy. Poison was an insane idea; one I could not believe no matter how many times he tried to persuade me otherwise. I wondered how Amadeus could have thought up something so utterly thoughtless. I mean, he was a great man, a wise man. I probably should have heeded his words more often, but this? I didn't understand it.

Without opening my eyes, I said, "You don't have to look so smug about it, Amadeus."

I could almost hear the man roll his eyes. "Never."

I heard the thick amusement in his tone and groaned as I rolled

over onto my side where I was facing the wall. "I don't have the time nor patience for this right now. Just go do something with yourself and wake me in the morning, if I'm asleep."

"Very good. Rest well, Theo. You need it."

I heard the archer rise to his feet and move to the door, but he softened his voice and said something else before he left. "I really do think you'll feel better once Seabert has a chance to see you for himself. Trust me?"

I heard the question in his voice, though I did not turn around or open my eyes to answer him. "Yes, of course I trust you. Always," I muttered.

The door closed then, and I was left alone where I might get some sleep. I lay in my bed for a long time, thinking about everything Amadeus had said, before a familiar, restless sleep embraced me. I didn't see my parents die, like I once did, rather I saw strange things that made no sense to me. I dreamed of ashes and smoke everywhere. I was surrounded by them, coughing on the thick smoke and heat, and then I saw a figure in the distance. The figure was always enveloped by shadow, and I could never get close enough to see who it was. I walked toward the figure slowly, as I always did in the dream, and then an arrow shot through the smoke into the figure. That was the first dream I had each night. The other dream I always had begun in an older city. I recognized it, but I couldn't place it. There were people fighting everywhere, screaming at one another. Isaiah and his men were attempting to calm things, but they were hugely failing. In my dream, I could never move, only watch. There was always one death, and it always happened right in front of me. A man, someone whom I did not know, was struck down at my feet. A young woman rushed over, and she screamed at me even as tears fell down her face. She screamed that she hated me, and then the dream was over, and I woke up far too early. I'd had strange dreams that meant things before, but these were different. These felt . . . Unsettling.

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the white ceiling. I pulled one of the blankets over my shoulders in the hope that it might warm me, but I knew better. I knew not much could warm me, and I was accustomed to it. I had learned to resist the shivers, and I had learned to hold in my coughs until I was alone or in the presence of those who knew me well. I knew ways to hide my fatigue from people who didn't know me, how to hide everything except the paleness of my skin. It had taken on an almost sickly sheen. I was

asked about it too frequently, and it irritated me when people interrupted me to ask whether I was ill. I always told them the same lie, that I was fine, but few of them believed that anymore. Whatever was wrong with me, plague or otherwise, was beginning to get on my nerves.

I ran my hands down my face and noticed the slight tremor in them. I could only imagine what Amadeus might say about that if he ever noticed. I glanced out the window and saw that the sun was only just rising. No one else in the castle would be awake, so I figured it would be the perfect time to practice mounting a horse. No one would be around to see me fall repeatedly. I stood up slowly and let the blanket fall from my shoulders, nearly falling over myself. I found that being ill the way I was came with a few setbacks, like aches and weaknesses in my body. As long as I kept moving during the day they tended to fade after the morning hours. I didn't bother picking up my cloak from the floor as I made my way to the door, figuring that I would likely get dirty and sweaty while I was failing.

I pulled open the door and went down the end of the throne room where two massive doors stood that would take me where my horse was kept, more or less. I noted that the guards were both asleep and shook my head as I took one of their keys, unlocked the doors, and returned the keychain to the guard. I supposed I would have to tighten my security around the castle at some point. I pushed the doors wide open and shivered in the chilly morning air as I stepped outside, not bothering to let them close softly. Probably best if they woke the guards up anyway.

I found Diamond where she always was, waiting in a clear area for me. I went to her and smiled briefly when I saw the braids Lici had put in her hair, a few dying flowers here and there. I took a moment to make sure no one was around before placing my foot in the stirrup. I hoisted myself up, managing to actually get on the saddle, but I had put too much weight into flinging myself over. I went over the opposite side and landed with a thud in the dirt. I pushed myself to my feet and tried again, this time not even making it all the way up before losing my balance. Another time, my right leg got stuck over the saddle in such an awkward position that I couldn't pull myself free or pull myself up all the way. Eventually, Diamond got tired of me being there and it was due to her moving and trotting that I fell heavily into the dirt, the breath knocked from my lungs entirely. At that point, I had half a mind to quit altogether, but I figured I might as well learn to mount a horse before I died.

I tried again to get on my horse's saddle. I tried for hours, and I did manage to get fully in the saddle several times, but I always fell off again. I noticed this was mostly because I was too short and my feet could not reach the stirrups so when Diamond started galloping, I usually lost my balance or lost my grip on the reins and fell off. It was after I fell off for the sixtieth time that I decided I'd had enough. I pulled myself off the ground, my hand automatically resting on my side where I had landed heavily too many times to count as I sat on a bench.

During my time out there accomplishing nothing except bruising myself, I glanced at the sun and noticed that it had nearly reached the middle of the sky. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the back of the bench. I didn't bother opening my eyes when I heard someone sit beside me, mostly because I already knew who it was and partly because I was already tired and a little irritated. Unless Amadeus had something important to say that I needed to hear or that would affect my people or country in any way, I doubted I would want to hear anything he had to say. I was willing to listen though. I was always willing to listen, no matter who was talking or how irrelevant the subject was.

"You're up early," Amadeus said quietly. I didn't bother giving him an answer. "You've clearly been making good use of your time. Did you manage to stay on the horse this time?"

I was glad that whenever he asked that, there was no judgment in his tone. "I did not."

"Theo, you really should consider—"

"Consider what? That I'm a failure? That I can't even stay on a horse?"

"Why do you always jump to the worst possibilities?" He sighed. "I was going to say you should consider taking a break. I know you want to be able to get on a horse yourself, but . . . I honestly think you're too short. I don't think you're ever going to be able to get on Diamond's back on your own."

"I know," I mumbled.

There was a brief quiet before Amadeus said, "You aren't going to argue with me?"

I shook my head and opened my eyes to look at him tiredly. "No, I'm not. I don't have time to argue, and you're right. I can't get on her back without help."

Amadeus rose to his feet and looked down at me. "You should clean yourself up and come inside to eat something. I'm sure Wisteria

and Liesel are waiting for you."

I furrowed my brow. "What about Ambrose? Where is he?"

"He's in the western cities with Isaiah. They're arranging things for you. You did say you wanted to go down and see everything for yourself."

"Yes. What did he say those two cities called themselves?"

"Lirvanth, I believe."

I clicked my tongue as I slowly stood up and brushed the loose dirt from my clothes and hair. "That's right. And they've elected a new king for themselves." I stood up straight and turned toward the archer. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but is that not against the law?"

Amadeus lifted an eyebrow. "It is. Do you intend to have them sent to the dungeons?"

I shrugged. "We'll see."

He took my arm before I could continue into the castle. "That isn't much of an answer."

"I never said I was going to imprison them, Amadeus, only that I would have to see. When I get there, I will see for myself how things are going and then we'll see."

"I don't think it's a good idea to send any of them to the dungeons."

"I didn't say I was sending them to the dungeons. *You* said that."

"And you didn't disagree."

"I'm not going to disagree because if they are breaking the law, then they should be punished accordingly. I did not say I would go there and just start imprisoning everyone. Why would I ever do that? That doesn't even make sense at all." I pulled away from him. "This is a stupid conversation anyway and I'm not having it with you."

He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes, something he loved doing when he was around me. "Fine. Go clean yourself up and eat something. We can talk later."

I started toward the castle, a wave of weariness washing over me as I thought of the day ahead, as I thought about Lirvanth or whatever they were calling themselves. Honestly, I preferred Sovanth and Lirveth over Lirvanth. They were trying too hard to dispel themselves from Feruneth and it was kind of ridiculous, in my opinion. At the very least, it was certainly getting on my nerves. I had just fought a war to keep this country from falling to pieces and they thought they could simply combine their names and assign themselves a new king? That was way beyond ridiculous and nerve

wracking. It was farcical and, despite having recently learned of it, I was already tired of it. If they didn't want anything to do with me or to do with Feruneth, too bad. They didn't get to make that choice.

As I stepped into the castle, the cold air still clinging to my skin, the morning conversations kept running through my skull. My muscles ached a bit from the futile attempts to mount Diamond, and my mind buzzed with the words I'd exchanged with Amadeus. He had mentioned poison. More than mentioned it, really. He had seemed convinced that I *was*, without any doubt, being poisoned. It wasn't the plague, of that much I was certain. The bitter thought lingered in my mind like a ghost, uncomfortable and unshakable despite its absurdity. I shook my head to dismiss my dismal thoughts.

I passed the long hallway where tapestries of Feruneth's history hung, their vibrant colors and woven scenes seeming to mock my fatigue. I wasn't sure whether to be enraged or simply resigned to the fact that my kingdom was being pulled apart, piece by broken piece.

When I reached the dining hall, I caught sight of Wisteria and Lici sitting at the long wooden table. Knowing Lici, their conversation could not have been a very sensical one. They hushed when they saw me, but the awkward silence that followed didn't bother me as much as it used to. Honestly, I preferred near silence to the typical din of the castle.

"You're late, dear," Ria said with a small smile that failed to reach her eyes, as it often did.

"I was out," I muttered, pulling a chair out for myself. The moment I sat down, Lici gave me a mug of something hot. I was glad that it didn't seem to be tea but rather a warm cider of sorts. "Thanks, love."

"How are you feeling?" Wisteria asked of me.

I took a sip of the drink without answering. My body was tired, but that was nothing new. It had been since the Weyannorian War was over. However, I could not say the same of my mind. Sure, it was fatigued as well, but in a different way. I was always torn between acknowledging my condition and ignoring it altogether. I'd be willing to bet that I was more than often ignoring it. I mean, the plague was one thing. The plague would go away. Poison was another thing entirely that no one in the castle, save myself and a few trusted friends, needed to know about. If I *was* being poisoned, I thought it best to keep that secret until I knew why someone wished to kill me. Perhaps they wanted my impressionable young sister to sit on the

throne rather than me. I was far from being impressionable.

"I'm fine," I said at last, giving them both the same tired lie I had been telling everyone, even myself. "It's nothing."

Lici quietly ate her bread and cheese, ignoring both Ria and me. "Theo," Wisteria began again, "it's always nothing. I know you aren't telling me the truth, and that's fine, but you don't have to tell me you're fine when you're not. That's dumb. Besides, Amadeus is worried about you."

I set the cup on the table and looked at her. "Amadeus is always worried about me or otherwise disappointed in me. His worries are, at the moment, misplaced."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he's worried about the wrong thing. Instead of worrying about me, he should worry about the Lirvanth situation."

"No, he should worry about you, Theo. He isn't your captain of the guard or your chief advisor, he is your man-at-arms, your warden. His duty is to protect you. He's only doing what you asked him to do."

I gave her a less-than-convincing smile and rose to my feet. "Yes, well, he's doing an overly terrific job then." I stopped when I reached the end of the dining hall and turned back to my future wife. "Ria, I'm going down to Lirvanth for a few days. I'll speak with you about it further before I leave. As Lici's usual caretakers are ill or away, would it be possible for you to stay with her while I'm gone?"

She smiled sadly. "Of course, dear. I'll find you later."

I nodded and turned on my heel, heading toward my room where I could write a letter to my captain and to Ambrose. I needed to hear from them and see how things were before I went there myself. I knew they didn't want me to go, but I was pretty sure they didn't get to decide where I went, my being king and all. Not that I would ever want to disrespect either of them, but I meant to go whether or not my own people wanted my death.

I pushed the door open and shut it behind me, sitting down at my desk and staring at a piece of blank parchment that was already there. I wondered briefly if it might begin to write itself if I glared at it long enough. I had no idea what I was meant to say to Ambrose. I wanted to know how things were, but how did one go about writing that? In all honesty, I had never written a letter before in my life. I suppose I could say something to this effect: "I'm planning to ride into the middle of what's likely going to get me killed. Please set an extra place at the table." Entirely useless.

The ink on my quill blotched onto the page as I tapped it absently, and I cursed under my breath. Amadeus would know exactly how I felt about going to Lirvanth; he always did. The man had an uncanny ability to see through every façade of mine. My point obviously being that I should get him to write the letter for me.

The door creaked open beside me. The archer's boots were too light to belong to anyone else, though there was an unusual hesitance in his step.

"If you're here to talk me out of going, save your breath."

I noted that he leaned against the doorway with crossed arms. "Why would I talk you out of it? You've clearly made up your mind. Stubborn as ever." I gave him no response. "You'll take me with you, of course." The way he said it was more of a statement rather than a question.

I turned my head and raised an eyebrow. "I'm not taking you anywhere. I'm going. Alone."

He chuckled lightly. "Sure you are. You'd die in a day, Theo. Two if they're feeling charitable."

"I'll have my sword, as I told Ambrose, and I'm not an idiot, contrary to what you may believe. I can go somewhere without getting killed. I'll handle it."

"Mmhmm. Like you're handling that letter?" He gestured to the parchment in front of me, where the inkblot had grown considerably.

I set the quill down with deliberate care. "I did not ask for your opinion."

"You rarely do," he replied, pushing off the doorframe and taking a step inside the room. "Here it is anyway: Stop pretending you're invincible, Theo. If you want to march into danger, fine, but at least let me watch your back. I'd rather not explain to the rest of the kingdom why their king was found with a dagger between his ribs. Personally, I'd rather not see you dead to begin with."

I hated how reasonable he always sounded. It made it harder to dismiss him outright. "I'll think about it."

Amadeus softened his expression slightly and came to sit on the desk's edge with a sigh. "My king, I thought you were over acting stupid about doing everything by yourself. It was, after all, *you* who asked me, begged me, to be your man-at-arms. Let me do my job, Theo. Please. Maybe they won't kill you, but I doubt they're going to be happy to see you."

I ran my fingers through my hair, knocking the crown off my head. I didn't bother picking it up. "I'm sorry, Amadeus. I'm just tired

and . . . I don't know. Something else. I'm not trying to be dismissive. I just . . . Have a lot to do and I'm trying to concentrate on those things rather than . . ." I coughed and turned away from him. ". . . Other things."

"People, you mean?"

"Yes," I admitted, my voice quiet as I stared at the blotch of dark ink. "People. The ones I've lost. The ones I'm supposed to protect. The ones who probably wish I'd disappear altogether."

Amadeus shook his head slowly and leaned forward slightly. "Theo, people don't hate you as much as you think they do."

"I'm not sure that's true, but it's kind of you to say."

"I don't say things to be kind. You're not perfect, no one is, but your people need you. The kingdom needs you. Whether you like it or not, there are people in this castle who need you too. Quit trying so freaking hard to throw yourself into situations you can't actually handle without me." I opened my mouth to protest but he held up a hand and continued. "You think this is just about protecting you? It's not. It's about the message you send. If your people see you riding into Lirvanth alone, what does that say? That you don't trust your own men? That you're reckless? That is not the kind of leader they'll follow, Theo. Not for long. That is not the kind of leader you said, you *promised*, to your people." He turned my head toward him and looked pointedly at me. "It isn't the kind of leader I crowned king."

Those last words hurt more than I cared to admit. The archer had a way of forcing me to confront things I would prefer to ignore. Part of that was because he never lied. I had never, *ever*, heard the man utter a single dishonest word in all my time knowing him. I turned my gaze toward the crown that lay on the wood floor, dully gleaming in the faint light. "I know. I know what I said, and I know the person you crowned. I'm sorry."

"I know you didn't ask for this, but you have it now, so don't keep trying to pretend you're the same person you were before. You aren't, and you aren't doing a great job of pretending either."

I exhaled a long breath and leaned back in the chair, giving the man a brief nod. "All right. You can come, but if you so much as look at me like I need saving, I swear—"

"I'll let you die," the bowman interrupted, a smile on his lips. "I wouldn't dream of ruining your lackluster death."

I rolled my eyes. "You're insufferable, Amadeus."

He stood and bent down to retrieve my crown. "And yet, you keep me around. Strange, isn't it?"

"Strange indeed," I muttered as he set the crown on my head and straightened his own tunic. He turned on his heel to leave but I rose also and took his arm. "As always, thank you. You truthfully are a loyal man-at-arms, Amadeus. I know I don't say it often, but it does mean a lot to me." He bowed and pulled open the door. "I'll get my things together if you'll prepare the horses. I want to be there before the sun is setting."

I noticed his gaze drift to the forgotten parchment. "Don't you have a letter to write?"

I shrugged. "I guess not, and don't act . . . Opinionated on the way there. If I want your opinion, I will ask for it."

"Fine. I'll only offer it when you act like an idiot."

I scowled at him. "I do not—"

"Yeah, you do. That's why I'm coming. To make sure you don't do anything especially stupid. Mildly idiotic is probably fine, but extremely stupid is pushing it, and that's typically the way you act."

I was about to argue with him but decided against it because he wasn't entirely wrong. I did have a tendency to do ridiculous things. Besides, I was running low on energy, and I didn't want to waste it on arguing with him for the third time or something. "Whatever. Go get the horses ready or find something else to do with yourself. I have plenty of my own things to do."

He nodded and grew more serious. "Very well. I expect to see you before afternoon, my king."

"Of course."

He left my room and closed the door softly. I returned to my desk and stared dejectedly at the ruined parchment before me. The ink blotch took up at least a third of the page and I had lost the little will I initially had to write the letter in the first place. I put my hand on the paper and crumbled it, then tossed it into the hearth where a fire was burning softly. I watched the flames lick eagerly at the paper before swallowing it whole. Much easier and more satisfactory than writing a letter.

CHAPTER THREE

The warmth of the fire crackling in the hearth was hardly comforting as I sat back in my chair, staring at the emptied desk in front of me. The faint scent of burning parchment lingered in the air as I traced the grooves in the wood with my finger. I thought of important things and things that mattered little to anyone except myself. Part of that was because they were things I had not shared with anyone, and the other part was because had I told someone about those things they would have looked at me like I was a total idiot, incapable of accomplishing even the simplest of tasks. Or perhaps I had not told anyone about them because that's what I thought they would think. In any case, they were things only I knew and that was the way I intended to keep it for a time.

After a while of doing nothing I had promised Amadeus I would do, I picked myself up from the chair and stretched my muscles. They protested after the morning's failures with Diamond, still a little sore from falling incessantly. My back ached where I'd landed most heavily, but it always ached from whatever lingering illness I had anyway. Several of my body parts ached off and on from that ailment. I was resigned to it at this point. I sighed when I finished stretching and picked up my cloak from where it had fallen earlier, draping it over my shoulders and fastening it in the front with fingers that trembled ever so slightly. The quiver in my hands was nearly imperceptible, but it was there. It was always there.

I stepped out into the throne room, the soft echo of my boots the only sound. I could feel the castle waking around me, faint murmurs and footsteps indicating the beginning of the day for the others who lived there. It was only a matter of time before someone tried to stop me with questions or concerns, so I quickened my pace toward the stables. As I neared the massive doors, I caught sight of Lici skipping ahead, her curls bouncing with each step.

"Lici," I called softly, but she didn't stop. Instead, she darted into the stables.

When I followed her inside, she was already standing by Diamond, her small hands were busy undoing the braids she had so carefully woven into the horse's mane only days ago. The flowers fell to the ground in a wilted heap, unnoticed by my small sister.

"What are you doing out here, love?" I asked, stepping closer.

"You left after breakfast," she said simply. "I thought you might be here."

"And here I am." I crouched down to her level, resting my hand on her arm. "You're supposed to be with Ria. She'll be worried if she doesn't know where you are."

Lici pouted. "I wanted to see you before you left."

I smiled softly and brushed a stray curl from her face. "I won't be gone for long. A few days, maybe."

"That's what you always say," she replied in a quiet voice. "It always feels longer than that, Theo."

"I'll try to be back sooner this time," I promised. "Now go back inside, all right? Ria will want to know where you've been."

She reluctantly nodded and wrapped her tiny arms around me in a quick hug. I held her for a moment longer than necessary before standing and watching her leave. Lici's small figure disappeared around the corner, and I turned back toward the castle. I still needed to speak with Wisteria before leaving. My fingers brushed Diamond's mane absently as I stepped away, thinking of what I might say to her. Rather, how I might word the things I wanted to say to her.

I noticed, as I walked through the castle halls, that everything was livelier now as morning turned to noon. I offered curt nods in passing but did not stop to exchange pleasantries. I saw many people reaching to stop me. I shook my head and asked them to wait a moment longer. I could not deal with them right then. When I reached Ria's door, I knocked lightly.

"Come in," she called.

I pushed the door open and found her standing by the window, bathed in the morning sunlight. She looked serene, as though untouched by the chaos that seeped into every corner of my existence. Her blue dress swayed slightly as she turned to face me. Her expression warmed when she really looked at me.

"Theo." She gave me a small smile. "I was wondering when you might come."

I stepped inside and shut the door behind me. "I wanted to speak with you before I left."

"I wish you wouldn't go."

I gave her an exhausted smile, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. "We've been through this, Ria. It's something I have to do. I can't keep hiding behind letters I can't write and reports I couldn't care less about."

"You're not hiding. You've done everything you can for those people. You've sent Ambrose, Isaiah, your men. They know you care."

"Yes, but they need to see me. They need to know that I'm

willing to help them, willing to rebuild their city. Willing to be there when they need me."

She folded her arms across her chest. "What happens if they turn on you, Theo? What if they don't care how much you've done?"

I shrugged. "Then I'll deal with it. It's a risk that I am more than willing to take."

"You shouldn't have to take risks at all."

"Of course I should. I'm the king; taking risks is my duty to my people. If every risk I take will improve my people and strengthen them, then I will take them all." I stepped closer and brushed the hair from her face. "I always come back, Ria. This time will be no different."

"Perhaps so, but you're always hurt in some form or fashion. Just . . . Promise you'll be careful."

"That's why Amadeus is coming."

"Theo, please."

"Yes, I'll be careful. Promise."

"Okay."

I said nothing, and for a long moment there was silence between us. I stared at her before taking her hand in mine. "When I get back, will you marry me? Please, Ria. It's been a month. I'm not asking for a grand ceremony, just . . . Marry me."

She gave the same answer I'd been hearing for weeks. "Theo, I've told you before. I won't marry you until you're well."

I dropped my hand to my side. "You know as well as I do that might never happen."

"Then I'll think about it. I love you, Theo, I do, but I cannot marry you unless I know it will last. Unless I know I'm not marrying a dead man."

I was about to argue but paused when I heard a familiar knock on the door. "My king, we should probably leave now."

I kissed Ria, properly, and offered her another attempt at a smile. "Take care of Lici for me," I whispered.

"Take care of yourself, Theo. Lici will be fine."

I gave a small nod before stepping away, my heart sinking lower and lower as I opened the door. Amadeus was leaning against the wall, his bow slung casually over his shoulder. He raised an eyebrow at me but said nothing, instead falling into step beside me as we walked toward the stables.

"Are you all right?"

I could hear the usual concern in his voice better than I

typically could. “I’ll be fine,” I muttered, the words more for myself than for him.

“Doesn’t seem that way. What did she say?”

I glared at him as we walked. “It is no concern of yours, and it shouldn’t matter to you. I’m perfectly okay.”

Amadeus shook his head but said nothing more as he pushed open the doors and led me to the stables where our horses were waiting, and where my sister was waiting. I looked pointedly at her and crouched to her level. “I thought I asked you to stay with Wisteria, love.”

“I want to stay with you, Theo.”

“I’m coming right back. I promise. Go inside and play.”

She wrapped her hands around my arm and lowered her voice to barely a whisper. “Last time you said that, it was a very long time before you came to get me.”

“This time I’m not running for my life. I’m just going to talk to some people and then I’m coming right home. That’s all.”

Tears danced in her blue eyes. “But will you come home tonight to sing to me?”

I shook my head slowly. “I’m sorry, love, but I won’t. Wisteria can sing it to you. You can tell her how it goes, and she’ll be happy to sing it.”

“She isn’t you. And she won’t sing it the way you do. I only like when you sing it or when Amadeus sings it. Not Ambrose. He doesn’t sound good.”

I raised an eyebrow at the archer, and he shrugged. “Listen, Lici. I’ll sing it for you now, and then the moment I come back home, the very first thing I’ll do is sing it to you again. How does that sound?”

She laid her head against my arm and nodded. “It sounds okay.”

I pulled her close and recited it to her, just the way she liked. When I finished, I kissed her cheek and whispered softly into her ear. “Three days at the most, love. That’s all. Then I’m coming home.”

“You promise?”

“Always.” I smiled. “Now, go find Ria and do something fun. Please. For me?”

“But—”

“But I want you to have fun while I’m away. Please?”

“Okay, Theo, but only because you asked.”

She kissed my cheek and obediently went inside the castle, likely to cry to the guards or to Ria or to whomever else she might find. I stayed crouched down and stared at the castle entrance, where

she had been only moments ago, though I wasn't really thinking about her. I knew she would be fine and there were plenty of guards in my castle who would be more than willing to give her whatever she wanted. No, it was Ria I thought about. My illness that she seemed so sure might kill me. I couldn't help but think she, and everyone else, was overreacting about the whole stupid thing. I wasn't dying. I was functioning just fine. Then again, maybe it was I who was *under*reacting.

I didn't move until Amadeus took my arm and pulled me to my feet. He didn't let go. "Theo. Are you sure you want to go? It seems to me that you're unsure about this, especially when it comes to your sister and Wisteria."

I turned toward him and let my shoulders fall. "I'm not unsure about this. I'm going to Lirvanth, Amadeus. They'll be fine."

"What about you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Are you going to be fine?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?"

He sighed. "Whatever Wisteria said to you has clearly affected you. What did she say?"

"I already told you that it doesn't matter for you to know."

"Fine, but whatever she said, whether it was nothing or about the marriage, shouldn't be bothering you this much."

I pulled my arm from his grasp and turned to face him fully. "Yes, it should be bothering me. I love her, Amadeus, and if she loves me, then why won't she marry me? It doesn't make sense."

The archer looked at me for a moment before speaking. "I can give you three reasons to explain that, but you aren't going to like any of them."

"The same way I still disagree with the poison thing?"

"Eh, no. Probably you'll feel much more offended by all of these suggestions except one."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Just tell me what they are."

"Well, one option is that she is genuinely concerned you're going to die shortly after she marries you and then she'll be grief stricken. Another option is that she simply doesn't love you. And the third option—"

"Wait."

"I knew I'd never get through them all without you interrupting. What?"

"I know she loves me, Amadeus. That's not an option."

"All right. Whatever. I knew you weren't going to like them all."

"The last one?"

He winced. "If you didn't like the second option, I doubt you'll like this one. Are you sure you want to hear it, even theoretically?" I nodded. "Okay. The third option is that she is with someone else."

I narrowed my eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

He took a breath and exhaled it slowly. "I mean that she is courting someone else that you don't know about. But that's just a thought, a suggestion. It doesn't mean I'm right. I could be completely wrong about all of these. You asked to hear them."

"Amadeus, you're a good friend. A great one, actually. I'm glad to have you with me, and I am glad that you don't seem capable of lying outright, no matter how much it sometimes irritates me. However, I *never* want to hear anything you just said again. Never speculate about Wisteria again. Never suggest anything of that nature. I don't want to hear it; I don't need to hear it; I never want to hear it again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my king, it is clear. May I say something though?"

"About Ria?"

"No."

"Fine then."

"If you don't want to hear what I have to say, then don't say you do." He put his hand on my shoulder and turned me toward my horse. "What you wanted to hear me say was that it isn't your fault that she isn't marrying you. I'm not going to tell you that because I'm not sure it's true."

I turned back around before he could even think about considering helping me onto my horse. "Then *I* might be the cause of this? Of her not wanting to marry me even when she said yes to begin with?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It is not my place to say."

"What if I want you to say?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Theo. If there is one thing I do not speculate about, ever, it is you. I know you better than you would like to think I do. It would be disrespectful, and I know the way you would react to hearing what I think is the cause of all this. Until later, I will say nothing to anyone unless I am certain of what I am saying."

"Is it not also disrespectful to deny your king a straightforward answer?" I muttered.

"Not if the answer is speculative about the king, Theo. I'll tell

you what I think later. For now, I thought you wanted to be there before the sun really began to set?"

I sighed. "I suppose I did say that." I turned back to Diamond and glanced over my shoulder at the bowman. "Help me up, please."

He practically lifted me onto the saddle, which was entirely unnecessary. I was more than capable of getting on for the most part. All I needed was a slight lift, and he had given much more than a simple lift. In any case, he adjusted the saddle on his own horse and mounted in a single, smooth motion. He glanced at me, and I noticed a weariness in his eyes that I knew in my heart I had caused the majority of. It wasn't the kind of tiredness that came from lack of sleep, though I suspected he hadn't been getting much of that either. It was the kind of tiredness that came from being my warden. I knew I didn't exactly make his job easy.

"You're quiet, Theo," he said softly.

I glanced at him briefly. "Just thinking."

"That's a dangerous habit. Care to tell me what about?"

I shrugged. "You were right earlier. About everything you said. It's frustrating."

"Frustrating because I might be right, or because you didn't want to see it for what it more than likely is?"

"Both. You make it sound so simple, but you're not the one in my position. I want to marry her, I do, but the more she says no, the more I wonder whether I should keep waiting for her to change her mind. Whatever illness I have now is not going to prevent me from doing my duty, or from anything else. If I am being poisoned, then there might be an issue, but I highly doubt that I am."

"You sound like you're trying to convince yourself, not me."

"Maybe I am. I don't know what else to do, Amadeus. She says no, and I keep asking. I feel like a fool, but I can't stop myself from wondering, hoping, that maybe she'll change her mind."

"She's afraid, Theo. Not of you, but of what marrying you would mean. You know that. She never really wanted to be the queen."

"I know that, but knowing doesn't suddenly make it easier to understand. What am I supposed to do? Just . . . Give up? Forget her and move on? I don't want to do that. I love her."

The archer looked at more intently than he had in a long time. "Do you love her?"

"Huh?"

"It's a simple question, my king. Do you or don't you love her?"

"I . . ." I exhaled a long breath. "Yes, I love her."

"So you don't love her then. If you really loved her, you wouldn't hesitate. You don't want to marry her."

I bit back a few ugly words I had in mind and turned away from him. "I never should have brought this up in your presence. Let's go before you have time to say anything else ridiculous that, frankly, I find offensive."

"I meant no offense, Theo. Forgive me."

"I'll think about it. Let's go."

I prodded Diamond forward before he could say anything else that I had less than no desire to hear. Yes, he made beautiful sense about everything he said, and that was the very reason I did not wish to hear it. I was tired of hearing things that made too much sense to argue with. I was tired of hearing the truth from my archer's mouth. He was right about nearly everything he'd said and there was only a single thing I could disagree with. That single thing being, of course, what he said about Ria. If I didn't love the woman, then why in Feruneth would I have asked her to marry me for the second time? What kind of idiot would do that? Would I do that? Did I love her? There. See what I mean? Amadeus had this way of making me overthink everything I had ever done in my entire life, and it was exhausting. I loved Wisteria from the moment I met her, I still loved her, and I wanted her to marry me. I wanted to spend my future with her by my side. If he didn't believe that, well, then that was his problem. I didn't want to have any part of it.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and adjusted my position on the horse. It would be a couple hours before I would dismount, and I'd prefer to prevent as much discomfort and soreness as possible. Although, it wasn't really my position that made me uncomfortable; it was . . . Well, other things. The things Amadeus had said to me. The poison thing. It was a little of everything, I supposed.

As we rode in the quiet stillness of the afternoon, I couldn't help but think that I should say something to the archer, anything, simply to break the silence. I had ridden in silence with him before, but this silence was not a comfortable one. Not at all, in any way. Thankfully, he spoke before I had to say a single word.

"Theo, I'm sorry for what I said earlier."

I glanced at him. "Why?"

He furrowed his brows. "I shouldn't have said any of it. I know you love her. I apologize."

"No, I didn't mean it that way. You don't need to apologize at all. You didn't say anything you shouldn't have said. You're right.

You're exactly right, Amadeus."

"I'm glad you aren't denying the truth. That's a start at least. You know what would really make me believe that you're not going to keep being an idiot?"

I sighed. "What?"

"If you would trust me when I say you don't have the plague."

I did not justify that with an answer. Granted, he could be correct, and I didn't have the plague, but that did not mean I was being poisoned. That was simply absurd. What I couldn't understand was why he thought that to begin with. Had he seen someone in the process of dying from poison? Did he recognize the symptoms? Was there something he hadn't told me? In any case, I was far from ready to believe poison was the cause of the way I felt.

I couldn't let the conversation be over yet though. "When did you say Seabert was arriving?"

"I didn't."

"Well, when is he arriving then?"

Amadeus shrugged. "I couldn't tell you."

"That's a ton of help."

"He'll probably be there when we get back."

"Okay."

We rode in silence for a time after that, and I watched the road stretch before us. The sun was beginning its course toward the horizon. At least I knew we'd be there before dark. I tried to just stare at the road and think about nothing, but I couldn't. My thoughts would never just shut up and give me a moment's rest. I really needed to get some sleep at some point. If I believed Amadeus about one thing, that was it. I hadn't had nearly enough sleep this past month and it was catching up to me quicker than I cared to acknowledge.

After a few more hours of riding, I said, "Amadeus, do you think I should just . . . Leave her?"

He did not answer right away. His gaze remained fixed on the road ahead, his jaw clenched. "No, I don't think you should leave her, but you need to think about what's most important right now. You're not well, Theo."

"I'm aware of that. It's the whole reason I asked the question. I can't just ignore everything else because I'm ill."

"I didn't say you should, but you will accomplish nothing if you can't even stand on your own by the end of the day. Wisteria and the kingdom are important, but both will fall apart if you are not there

to keep them together."

I closed my eyes briefly. He was right, I knew that, but the truth still was no easier to swallow than it had been before. "You aren't wrong," I muttered.

"I don't need you to admit that, my king," he said, actually turning to face me. "I just need you to remember why I crowned you king."

"Why *did* you crown me king? My own people beg for my resignation, even then they did, and you . . . You didn't. You barely knew me. I never even asked forgiveness for lying to you." I lowered my gaze to the road. "I thought you were dead that night, Amadeus," I breathed.

"I crowned you king because you asked me to, Theo. I know your people don't exactly worship you and I know that you never wanted this, but I also know you better than you probably know yourself. I know how you think, I know how you react to things, I know what all of this is to you. I know that you would never step down from the throne because you love your country and you care about your people, whether or not you would ever admit that. Theo, you would never step down because you want to do a better job than your father did, because you want your country to prosper. I crowned you because I know who you truthfully are, and *that* is the person I crowned king."

I brushed a hand over my face and nodded vaguely, saying nothing as I allowed the silence to drag on. I had known that Amadeus thought of me the same way he thought of his own late son, Caius. I knew what he meant to me. I had not known that he trusted me wholly to rule Feruneth. I respected the man, more than I could ever put into simple words. I had told him before that he was a fine replacement for a father, and I had meant that. I meant that now, but things seemed so bent out of shape just a month later. *I* seemed to be so bent out of shape, and I didn't know anything I was trying to do. I barely knew who to trust anymore except Amadeus. I could always trust Amadeus.

Glancing at the dead trees as we rode, I noted that they were blackened with soot. The crumbling buildings, collapsed roofs, broken glass. There was a point in our ride when the road had faded into blacks and grays rather than the color of dirt, a gradience of ash and destruction. I noticed the gates to the city scarcely hanging onto their hinges. The left one was leaning precariously on the wall, waiting for a strong gust of wind to blow it over. The walls of the

city were degenerated and still small stones crumbled off every now and then. I could see the smoke and ash floating through the thick, musty air. Had we been nearer, I was sure I would've been able to hear my people coughing, choking on the air they were supposed to be able to inhale.

CHAPTER FOUR

I saw two figures on either side of the gate as Amadeus and I came to them. I recognized neither man at first, not with the soot smeared over their faces and clothes, until I was sitting in the saddle right in front of them. Amadeus slid from his mare's saddle and handed the reins off to a guard that must've been here with Isaiah. I did the same, though the archer did have to take my arm while I caught my balance. Ambrose and Isaiah lowered themselves into bows before giving me brief details.

The king called himself Wallace Belately, and he seemed a fine enough man, reasonable at least. No one in the city cared much for me and they all wanted to see me step down or die, either would suffice. No riots had broken out yet, and things seemed to be in an orderly fashion. I relaxed a little knowing that I wouldn't be walking directly into my own grave. When the two of them stopped talking, I nodded and thanked them, holding up a hand so they wouldn't say anything else. There were some things I wanted to know that they had said nothing about.

"Have there been many more victims of the war under the rubble or haven't either of you thought to look?"

Isaiah frowned. "My men have found seven dead and four survivors in the time they've been stationed here. The wounded are being sent to Tinnober, where they can be best taken care of. Lysette is the head doctor there, you know. Highly educated on that type of thing."

Oh, I was well aware of that. Her unhealthy love for me had never quite dimmed entirely. I had burned many of her letters without breaking the wax seal. "Yes, I'm sure they'll be well cared for and returning home in a matter of days. It's the dead I'm concerned about, Isaiah. Where are they all being buried?"

Ambrose answered after my captain shrugged. "They're buried where they're found, Theo."

"Okay. Everything is under control then?" They both nodded. "Wonderful. Let's go."

I started toward the city only to be stopped by my warden when he grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. "Theo, please. They want you dead, in case you'd forgotten."

"I know that. Do you think I'm that stupid, Amadeus?" I paused for a moment. "Don't answer that."

"Perhaps you should think this through for a moment, my king.

Maybe they won't try to kill you, but they aren't fans of yours either," Isaiah said.

I sighed. "They've scarcely seen me. Without my crown, they aren't going to recognize me. Not to mention I look like I'm dying. I'll be fine." I noticed Ambrose's grin and glared at him. "What?"

"You're still wearing your crown."

I lifted it off my head and handed it to Amadeus. "Not anymore. Is there anything else any of you have to say?"

"Your cloak, my king," Isaiah suggested. "Too fancy for a traveler, even from Feruneth."

I unfastened my cloak and called the guard back. He was a good distance away but not out of earshot, though I did have to call to him more than once before he heard me. I draped my cloak over Diamond's saddle and waved the man away with a nod of thanks. I turned back to my captain and raised an eyebrow.

"Is there anything else that you think I should remove?"

He shook his head, but Ambrose gestured toward my hip. "Your sword, Theo. Everyone knows you're a fine swordsman, and that sword is rather fine."

"Yes, it is. I'm not taking it off."

"They'll recognize that it can't possibly belong to a traveler. You should take it off if you really don't want them to recognize you by anything."

I shook my head. "And what will you have me take off next? Is my tunic too fancy as well? My boots aren't muddy enough? Shall I rub dirt in my hair?" He had the audacity to shrug in response to that. "Ambrose, no. I am not doing any of that. The sword stays, the clothes stay. We're not even going to make it into the city before midnight at this rate."

He sighed. "Then you could give it to Amadeus to wear. He's already got a bow, no one will care that he has a sword too."

"Archers don't carry swords," Amadeus said next to me.

"Perhaps not, but wardens assist kings." I undid the clasp at my waist and handed him the belt. "Please?"

"If you need it?"

"You're all behaving as though the very first thing they're going to do is try to kill me. It's inane, and I'm cold standing here. Can we go now?"

Amadeus took the belt and wore it around his own waist. "You're aways cold, but we can go, yes."

"Good."

I turned on my heel, satisfied that they had stopped talking about my opulent appearance. Honestly, did they really think I was so dull as to walk into a city that wanted my death and show off my royalty? If they did think that, well, I'd need to have a few choice words with the two of them. Amadeus would never change his mind about anything he thought about me, and I had already had several words with him. I knew what he thought of me, and I didn't intend to change that. Isaiah and Ambrose, on the other hand, ought to know me better than that by now. I suppose I could allow Isaiah a little more leniency, as he's only known me for a little over a month, but Ambrose had grown up with me. He should know better. I was disappointed in him.

I heard them following behind me shortly after I had passed through the gates of Lirvanth, which was a good choice on their parts. I hadn't meant to go into the city alone, no matter how little I looked like royalty. My hand automatically reached for the sword that wasn't there as we walked through the cobbled streets, and I shook my head in exasperation. It was hard to believe I had handed over my only means of self-protection to my archer. Well, not my *only* means. I always kept a dagger in my boot in case things like this happened, in case other people (Ambrose) decided I no longer needed my sword, which I always needed.

It wasn't until we began to near the main part of town that I really began to hear people moving around and doing daily tasks, living their lives as best they were able. It did make me sad to realize that there were barely a hundred people who lived here, and every single one of them had decided to hate me and my country and everything I was trying to do for them. I didn't really blame the people for that; I blamed whoever was in charge for putting that idea in the heads of my people, in the heads of young, innocent children. They had no part in any of this. They should be left alone and allowed to play and do whatever they wanted to do.

I slowed down and came to a stop in what I supposed must be the center of town, as there was a platform and a man standing on that platform, giving a speech. One of many he'd given before, I was sure. I presumed it must be Wallace Belately, the king of Lirvanth. I clicked my tongue and crossed my arms over my chest, scowling at the man as he rambled on.

"People of Lirvanth, I won't waste your time pretending I'm here to deliver good news. I won't flatter you with hollow reassurances or tell you that everything will get better tomorrow. You're smarter

than that, and frankly, I respect you too much to insult your intelligence. So, let's skip the pleasantries and talk about the truth—the truth you already know but that no one else seems willing to say aloud.

"Your suffering? Your ruined city? All of it traces back to King Theophilus Dresden. A name that should be etched into your memories like a bad scar. The man who claims to rule over us all, who wears a crown he's done nothing to earn, and whose decisions—no, whose *indifference*—have turned your lives into this nightmare. He's not here to see the wreckage of your homes. He's not here to hear the cries of your children. He's not here to bury the dead or comfort the living. Why would he be? To him, you're just a distant obligation, an inconvenience he'd rather ignore.

"His soldiers march through your streets. His decrees strip you of what little you have left. His taxes keep your stomachs empty and your coffers barren. What does he give you in return? Nothing. Not protection, not prosperity, not even the barest acknowledgment of your existence. He calls himself your king, but what kind of king lets his people rot in the shadow of his throne?

"I see you. I see the pain, the anger, the hopelessness in your eyes, and I understand it because I share it. You've been abandoned, cast aside as though you don't matter, as though your lives are worth less than the coins lining Feruneth's treasury. Yet, he expects your loyalty. He expects you to bow your heads and be grateful for the scraps he tosses your way—scraps he wouldn't feed to his hounds.

"Look around you. Look at the ruins of this city, at the families torn apart. This is what King Theophilus has given you. This is his offering, and yet he dares to call himself your king. Tell me, does that sound like a ruler worth following? Does that sound like someone worthy of your respect, your allegiance, your faith?"

Wallace bowed theatrically and stepped down, moving away from the crowd without another word. I was speechless; shocked; appalled. I had never, *never*, meant to make anyone feel that way. Was I really that kind of person? Had I really done those things? Perhaps I had not personally come here to see how things were before now, but I had tried to make it better for them. I had given them gold. I had men rebuilding homes for them. I was doing everything I could. Wasn't I? No. I hadn't given them myself, my own faith in them as my people. That was the root of all of this.

I pushed my way through the crowd, meaning to walk straight

onto the platform and announce exactly who I was and what I meant to do, but Ambrose took my wrist and pulled me back with Amadeus and Isaiah. The three of them wore the same exact expression on their faces: Blatant disapproval.

I gestured toward the platform. "I can't just let him say that. What kind of person would I be if I left it at that? It's no wonder they all hate my guts when they hear things like that every day."

"You can't just go up there and say you're the king of Feruneth. You're here to subtly make things better, not to foolishly announce your title and expect them to respect you. You're better than that, Theo."

"Am I? According to Wallace, I'm the worst person to ever walk the earth."

"Maybe so, but that does not mean you're allowed to throw yourself into easily avoided danger for no good reason."

"This *is* a good reason, Ambrose. They need to know that I'm here. I'm going up there and telling them. I don't care about whatever danger you think I'm putting myself in by doing it. I don't care that I came here meaning to hide who I am. I will not stand here and let that be all that is said about me."

I turned away from them all and returned to the platform. I stepped up onto the wood and faced the crowd of confused people, my confused people. It had been a while since I'd given a speech, but I had a few words in mind.

"I won't stand here and try to erase what's been said or pretend that your anger isn't justified, but I will tell you this—I came to Lirvanth because of you, because I care about what happens to you. Not as a king looking down from a throne, but as someone who knows loss, struggle, and regret better than most.

"I see a city that has endured too much, yet still stands. I see people who have been through the worst and still find the strength to carry on. I want to be part of that strength, not as a ruler demanding loyalty, but as someone who owes you more than I've given.

"I won't ask for your forgiveness or your faith, but I will ask for one chance. A chance to prove through my actions that I can be the king you deserve. Not by words, not by titles, but by standing with you in rebuilding what's been broken. As your king, I ask only this: Let me show you my faith and my loyalty to you as my people."

As I finished speaking, a faint murmur rippled through the crowd, uncertain and skeptical though quieter than before. I stepped

down from the platform with measured calm, my gaze steady despite the heavy sadness and hurt my heart felt for my people.

It happened faster than I could comprehend, faster than I know even now. I heard a sharp whistle through the air, and a rock struck me hard near my temple. The pain was instant, a sharp, burning throb radiating across my skull as I staggered slightly. I instinctively raised a hand to the wound and felt warm blood slicken my fingers. I blinked against a heavy dizziness that followed.

Amadeus and Isaiah came to me quickly, each taking one of my arms. "Theo—"

"It's fine. I'm all right," I interrupted in a soft voice that was steadier than I felt.

I kept my hand pressed to the wound and straightened, taking a moment to steady my breathing. I could feel the blood draining from my face that was streaked with crimson. Through vision only a little blurred, I saw the crowd shift uneasily, a mixture of gasps and muttered curses rising around us. Someone shouted, "That's what he deserves!" while others turned away in discomfort.

Amadeus tightened his grip on my arm, bringing me back to reality. "You aren't staying here, Theo. Let's go somewhere else."

I glanced at the platform a last time, staring at it dully for a moment. I nodded and let the archer and my captain lead me away. I hadn't come for admiration or empty praise, but a little understanding would've been nice.

Amadeus kept his hand firm on my arm, his pace never faltering, as though he could drag me away from the scene of my humiliation. Isaiah was tense. His eyes kept darting around, searching for more danger. It was the very reason he was my captain of the guard. The blow had clearly shaken him, but I wasn't sure if it was the injury or the cruelty behind it that bothered him more. I couldn't tell anymore. I didn't know what bothered me more either.

"I told you it wasn't a good idea," Ambrose's voice was low when he joined us, calm but with a touch of exasperation. He had fallen back a few paces, though his words were clear enough.

I was too tired to argue so I barely glanced at him. "It had to be done, Ambrose. I couldn't just stand there."

"I understand your need to make your presence known, but you've made it abundantly clear that they won't welcome you with open arms. This won't be solved in a day, Theo."

"I know that, but I needed to do *something*."

The walk back to the temporary lodging Isaiah's men had set up

felt longer than it should've been. With every step, the pain in my head grew sharper, and the blood soaking into my hand began to feel colder. I didn't let anyone else know that, but my vision swam a little and I was more frustrated with the whole of Lirvanth than with anything else. Well, perhaps not more than myself.

When we reached the largest tent, which had been set for me, Amadeus guided me to a chair and sat me down. Without a word, he knelt beside me, pulling a clean cloth from his satchel. His movements were as deliberate and precise as ever, his rough hands steady despite the situation and the nervous crowd just outside. He didn't ask for permission; he simply worked, dabbing at the wound near my temple with the dampened cloth.

I winced as the fabric met the cut, the sting worse than I'd expected. "It isn't as bad as it looks," I mumbled.

"That's for me to decide," the archer replied. "Hold still."

I obeyed, closing my eyes briefly to steady the spinning in my head. I noticed that Ambrose and Isaiah had left, likely to scatter the mob and calm them down. I felt Amadeu's hands clean all the blood away and inspect the injury. For a moment, everything was silent, and I relaxed in the chair. The quiet didn't last. It never did.

"You shouldn't have done that. Not because it was wrong, but because you knew they weren't ready to hear you," my warden said in a surprisingly unaccusatory tone.

"They'll never be ready if I don't say anything. What would you have me do instead? Stand idly by while he turns my own people further against me?"

"You were supposed to listen to Isaiah. To Ambrose. To me." He folded the cloth and pressed it carefully against the cut. "You can't force them to accept you before they're ready to even listen to what you have to say."

I met his gaze. "I wasn't trying to force anything. I just . . . I wanted them to see me as one of them. Not a crown, not a title. Another citizen."

"Perhaps they did, but you can't forget that they've lived years of pain and anger. It won't vanish overnight, no matter what you say. You've done enough for today. You should sleep."

"It doesn't feel like enough."

"It rarely does, but if you stop now, then they'll never see the king you're trying to be." He finished tending to my wound and stood up straight. He looked at me for a moment before unfastening my belt from his waist and holding it out to me. "I know Ambrose

insisted you not wear it, but I don't want it, and I think you might need it."

I took it and furrowed my brow. "Do you think it's going to come to that?"

"No, but I think it's better to have it and not need it than the other way around."

I put the belt around my waist and the familiar weight of it comforted me. It was a relief to know that I had my sword with me now. As he stepped back again, he softened his expression, though his eyes stayed alight with concern.

"Rest, my king. We'll keep watch."

"You ought to sleep too, Amadeus. I know you don't get much of it."

He smiled at me and shook his head. "More than you allow yourself, I'm sure. I'll rest when I can."

"All right, but please refrain from acting like me."

"No worries, I would never."

I rolled my eyes and gestured vaguely toward the exit of the tent as I lay back in the uncomfortable wooden chair with a sigh. As tired and as exhausted as I was, I doubted sleep would come. That was fine though, I hadn't expected it to come anyway. It rarely deigned to embrace the likes of me, a failure of a king and a sorry sap who probably couldn't trust his closest of friends. I mean, I trusted them all now and I still refused to believe that I was being poisoned, but if I was then that would mean it had to be someone who was with me most of the time. Therefore, the obvious conclusion is that I can't possibly be in the process of being poisoned. It simply didn't make sense, and I still could not believe that my own archer had thought that up. Tsk tsk tsk.

I heard Isaiah coming before I opened my eyes, his boots crunching on the packed earth outside the tent. He entered with a drawn look on his face and a tight jaw. "The crowd has dispersed. Ambrose is still out there making sure things stay calm."

I straightened and leaned forward in the chair, my elbows resting on my knees. "Good. Thank you, Isaiah."

"Yeah, well, you shouldn't have taken that risk, King Theophilus."

"Too late. I already did and I was always going to."

"I know you think you had to, but there is a vast difference between bravery and recklessness. You're bordering on the edge of that line, my king. You'll be no help when you're deceased."

I raised an eyebrow. "When?"

"When, if you keep this up. I won't sugarcoat it. You're making it harder for your man-at-arms to protect you from your own idiocy."

"You think I don't know that? I know the risks better than you think, Isaiah, but I cannot let Wallace poison the minds of my people. They're my people to protect, and allowing them to be misled is not in the job description. They need to hear me, not him. They need to know the truth. They need to know I'm willing to stand before them, even if it costs me."

"If it costs you everything? Then what? Your people thought you were dead once already. They don't need to find out you've really gone and died somewhere. Feruneth needs its king."

Amadeus, who'd been quiet until now, spoke from where he stood near the back of the tent. "He's right, Theo. There are people, *your* people, who can't afford to lose you. No one can, not really. The people might not see it, or care to admit it, but you're the only thing holding this kingdom together."

"Holding it together? You're hilarious, Amadeus," I said dryly.

He sighed. "I'm being serious, and you should too. They wouldn't know what to do without you leading them. Honestly. Your entire country would collapse, piece by piece."

As much as I wanted to stand up and tell him he was wrong, I knew I couldn't because he wasn't wrong. I had thought the same thing only earlier that day. My country was far from being a country, and I could find no one to blame except myself for that. I think the bowman knew I blamed myself for it. Perhaps I was keeping it together as much as I could, but I was also letting the little pieces, the pieces that meant the most, slip through my fingers like grains of salt.

No matter how much I wished it were otherwise, no matter how much I tried to change that fact, I felt that nothing I did would change the resolve of cities like Lirvanth from denying my leadership. That, more than anything, broke my heart. I didn't mind that they didn't like me, that I couldn't care less about. No, I minded that they thought I was doing such an awful job that they felt they needed a new king to tell them what to do. That they felt betrayed by me because I hadn't listened to them. I *had* listened to them, but I had not done anything about it. Instead, I brushed off their concerns as though they were little more than crumbs. I suppose I should feel ashamed of that, but I don't. I felt sad for them and that was all.

Isaiah sighed heavily and leaned against the tent poles. "What

do you intend to do about Wallace?"

It sometimes shocked me how much Isaiah sounded like a captain giving orders when he'd only been my captain of the guard for a little over a month. "I don't know. Lirvanth is already teetering and he's only pushing it closer to the edge. If it tips, so will Veeran and the rest."

Amadeus looked at me, and I turned away from the pity in his eyes. "Veeran is already gone, Theo. You know that."

I shook my head. "I know Veeran hates me. I know they want a king who isn't me, someone they can look up to without remembering . . ." My voice faltered for a moment. "Without remembering what happened, but that does not mean they won't listen to reason. When I'm done here, I'm going to Veeran. I don't care about their rebellion from Feruneth as a whole, I don't care that they might actually try to kill me if I set foot in their city. I care only that they are my responsibility, and I will speak with them until their rebellion falls apart or else I will resign as king. I have no right to be the king of a country that I am scarcely sure is even a country anymore."

"Resign?" Isaiah asked, askance. "You can't mean that, my king. This country needs you, even if Veeran can't see that, even if Lirvanth can't see that, even if you yourself do not see it."

I met his gaze as I rose to my feet. "What kind of king I am, Isaiah, does not matter if it is beyond my capability to bring this country back to itself. If I can do nothing except let my people starve for leadership and watch as they turn on one another, then the kind of king I am will never matter when it is no longer my duty."

Amadeus pushed Isaiah out of his way, not unkindly, and stood in front of me. "Theo, it's my job to protect you, yes?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"And you're in danger as a king, yes?"

"Yes," I sighed. "Where are you going with this?"

"If you step away from the throne, if you aren't the king anymore, if you no longer have a title that means something, you will be in infinitely more danger from Veeran. If indeed it is my duty to protect you, then is it not also my duty to prevent you from resigning?"

"You're wrong. I'd be no more in danger without the crown than I am now. At least then, if Veeran chooses to act, the rebellion will fall on no one's shoulders but my own because I am the person who hurt them. I'd rather bear that than drag Feruneth into ruin because

of my mistakes."

He stepped nearer. "No. That isn't true, and you know it. This is about all of the cities. It seems I still haven't said it enough times to get through your thick skull. Whether or not you will admit it, you're the heir, you're the king, and therefore it is your duty to pull yourself together and quit acting . . . However you're acting right now. It's driving me mad, and likely everyone else who's listening to this." He took a sharp breath and continued before I could say anything. "You're trying to make yourself the villain. You're trying to convince yourself that it's all too much, that you're already a failure, that you've already lost. You want to give up before you even try. You think if you step away, it will all be easier and everything will just disappear.

"Theo, I know that seeing your country like this hurts you. I know you question everything you do, overthink *everything*. I know you blame yourself for all of this, but that doesn't mean anything is over. Not your country, and not your reign. *You're* the one who gets the last say in all of this, not the cities or the people, *you*."

"I'm not who the people want anymore, Amadeus. I never was. Nothing I do for them does anything and it never changes their minds."

"You aren't failing. You're doing what you can, and that is all anyone can ask for."

"Except they ask for more, Amadeus! Every day, I'm met with their complaints. I listen to their begging voices. It isn't enough and if Lirvanth isn't going to listen, I can't keep doing this. I can't keep living in constant ache of all of this."

"Then don't. You're making it seem so much more hopeless than the reality." He put his hands on my shoulders. "You don't give up on your people. You never have. That, nothing else, is what makes you the king you are. You're here, in Lirvanth, because you wanted to listen to them. You came here to help them, so do it. Stop sulking and help them."

"I can't just pretend everything is fine!"

"You aren't pretending. You're giving up before ever having tried."

"I'm not giving up. I just don't know what else to do. I can't keep acting like something I'm not. I'm not the king they wanted. I'm not the king they need. I never have been."

"Don't look at yourself like you've already lost," the archer snapped. "You are so wrapped up in what you think you've failed at

that you've allowed yourself to forget everything you've done right. You're still king, and that means you have to lead."

"I can't—" I started, but he cut me off.

"Yes, you can!" He took a tired breath and let his arms fall to his sides. "You can, Theo. You just need to stop looking for reasons to give up and start remembering why you're here in the first place."

I dropped my head and rubbed my eyes. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I don't need your apology, my king. I've heard it enough times. What I need is for you to quit doubting everything you do. Don't hide behind your mistakes and let them be the only thing people know you for. You're the king, and you need to act like it. Lead your people, don't lose your people. That's all I ask."

I sank down into the chair and held my head in my hands. "Okay. If that's what you need from me, then that's what I'll give."

He crouched in front of me and pulled my hands away from my face. "Look at me, Theo." I met his worn gaze and figured my expression was likely just the same. "It isn't what I need from you; it's what you need from yourself."

I smiled. "I don't remember asking you to be a philosopher-at-arms, Amadeus."

He shook his head but smiled wearily anyway. "I'm not being one, I'm simply telling you in a kind way that we're all sick and tired of you overthinking everything."

I let my smile fall as I glanced through the tent door, seeing Isaiah standing outside with Ambrose, trying to keep everything calm. I didn't remember him leaving. In any case, I noted that it was dark outside and saw that the people were finally retiring for the night. I wished I was able to do the same, but I did not have that kind of luxury. Instead, there were things I meant to do before I left. Things I meant to say.

I rose to my feet and coughed lightly, shivering when a breeze blew inside the tent. Amadeus frowned but said nothing. "I'm going to speak with Wallace and I'm not coming back until I've knocked some sense into him."

He nodded. "I wish someone would do the same for you."

I gave him no response and stepped outside, leaving him alone to think up more insults. I pulled my arms around myself, wondering when it had gotten so cold out. I meant to keep walking toward Wallace, whom I supposed must be in his own home, but Ambrose took my arm and pulled me aside.

I glared at him. "What do you want, Ambrose?"

"What are you doing? I thought you were going to sleep?"

"I am, as soon as I've spoken with Wallace."

"Can that not wait until morning?"

"No, it can't. I don't want to be here for long. If I can fix this tonight, then that is what I'll do. I know this is important, but I have more pressing matters that require my attention also. I want this done as quickly as it can be."

He sighed as he removed his cloak and held it out to me. "Fine. At least take this with you."

"I won't be long. I don't need it but thank you. Get some rest and make Isaiah rest also. If I come back to find either of you still awake, I'm going to send you both back to the castle."

"I'll see what I can do. What about Amadeus?"

I shrugged. "What about him?"

"Shouldn't he rest too?"

I almost laughed at that. "Ambrose, please. You think he would sleep because I asked him too? No, he wouldn't. Besides, I'm not worried about him. I know he'll be fine, and he'll sleep when I come back. On the other hand, I need you and Isaiah to get some rest because if we do need to go to Veeran, I will need you both with me."

"All right, but don't do anything especially stupid."

I smiled. "I would never."

With that, I left him standing there and made my way toward the center of town. I had seen Wallace go behind the platform, so it was natural to assume he was at the back part of Lirvanth. He was likely staying in one of the only houses still standing.

CHAPTER FIVE

I stepped onto the platform and followed the destruction further into the city until I came across a small wooden building. Its windows were broken into pieces, the roof was covered with holes, but it looked fine enough for a temporary place to stay. I tapped lightly on the door, afraid of breaking a hole in the rotting wood. It wasn't long before Wallace pulled it open and scowled at me.

"What do you want? It's late, *Your Majesty*." I did not miss the mocking tone he used for those last two words.

"I am aware, and don't call me that. I want to talk."

"Fine." He pulled the door open wider and stepped aside, gesturing to a seat. "Sit, if you've come all this way to argue."

I lowered myself into the chair and noticed that he stayed standing, arms crossed with glaring eyes. I met his gaze. "You've made your opinions of me and my rule quite clear. So tell me: Why continue with the speeches? What do you hope to accomplish?"

He leaned against the warped doorframe. "I'm trying to keep the city from collapsing completely because you clearly can't."

"I did not come here to be insulted, Wallace. I've heard enough of those to last the rest of my life. If you have something to say about me or my rule, say it to my face, not through some carefully crafted speech meant to rile up the city."

"You don't want honesty, King Theophilus. You want compliance."

"That's ridiculous. I'm here because I want to know what you hope to achieve by making me seem like a tyrant."

"Please. I don't have to do anything. You left us to clean up your mess, and the city has drawn its own conclusions. Abandoning Lirvanth really did wonders for your reputation."

"I didn't abandon Lirvanth," I snapped. "I made a decision to save Feruneth as a whole. I had to choose between cities, between lives."

"Oh, and Lirvanth wasn't worth saving. Now I understand."

"That isn't what I said."

"But it's what you did. You left this place to rot, *Your Majesty*. While you were off being king of a country that barely tolerates you, we were here. We were begging for scraps, trying to survive."

"I know that. I think about it every day, but I can't fix the past, Wallace. I mean to make things right, but you're making that harder than it needs to be."

"This isn't about me, or you. It's about the people you left behind, the ones who had no choice but to pick up the pieces you dropped. Maybe I resent you for leaving, but I don't hate you. You're not worth that much effort."

I rose to my feet. "If that's how you really feel, why keep at it? Why keep this city at war with its king? If you hate me so little, then stop acting like you want me dead."

"I don't want you dead, but that does not mean I forgive you, either. You left, King Theophilus. You left us to fend for ourselves, and now you come back expecting to give a simple speech and fix everything. It doesn't work like that."

"I know it doesn't, but you undermine me with every word that comes out of your mouth and it isn't helping anyone, least of all yourself." I walked past him without turning in his direction and stepped outside his house.

"Wait."

I clenched my jaw and turned back around to see him standing in the doorway. "I should've explained it to you. I didn't want to be a stupid king. I was forced into this. The council of Lirvanth needed someone to stand in front of the people, someone to take the blame if everything fell apart. I didn't have a choice."

I frowned. "Forced by whom?"

He looked at me. "First the council, but they're all dead now. They took my brother, and I did it to keep him alive, though he's dead now. I kept the people calm, gave them someone to follow."

"If they're gone, then why are you still doing it?"

"Because now you're forcing me to do it. If I stop, this town will eat itself alive. I don't hate you, King Theophilus, but I'm still stuck cleaning up the mess you left behind. I can't walk away from it until you take my place as the king of Lirvanth. Perhaps you're the king of Feruneth, but that means you must also be the king of the entire country."

"Then let me do my duty and stop making my people hate me. I have enough of that in my own castle."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Listen to them."

"Very well. If they will listen to you by evening tomorrow, then I will stop talking and I will give my loyalties and this city to you."

I nodded. "Thank you, and I apologize."

He dipped his head in response and closed the door softly, leaving me to return to the tent in the dark. The streets were

entirely empty as I made my way down them, and I silently thanked Isaiah and Ambrose for that. I crossed my arms over my chest while I walked. My shoulders were hunched to ward off the chill, but that did little to give me warmth. Things rarely provided any warmth for me in those days. It was likely due to whatever illness was inside me. I was suddenly sorry I had been deluded enough to leave my cloak behind. It occurred to me that I hated logic, as there was often no way to argue against it. Amadeus was that way too.

I was thankful when I saw the entrance of my tent and even more thankful when I recognized Amadeus still awake in. I pulled the tent flaps apart and closed them again as I went inside, hoping for a little heat, but I was greeted with no such pleasantries. Rather I thought it colder inside than it was outside, and I was shivering a bit when I sat on the cot at the far side.

The archer noticed me and dug through his bag, finding a blanket large enough for a bear. He came over and sat in the chair beside my cot, still holding the blanket. "When you said you were going to pack, I thought that meant you were going to pack."

"I did pack."

"What?"

"The clothes on my back."

"Theo, that's hardly the definition of packing."

"I don't need anything else."

"Well, if that's how you feel I guess I won't give you this blanket or anything to eat."

I glared at him. "You know that isn't what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"You always pack more than enough for both of us. I was counting on you, Amadeus."

"Shouldn't the king's people count on him to provide, not the other way around?"

I rolled my eyes. "Just give me the blanket, please. It's freezing in here."

He smiled and dropped it into my lap. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"What do you have?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not giving you anything besides water, Theo. Heaven knows we don't need that."

I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders and lay back. "I wasn't serious, Amadeus. I don't drink. Water is fine, as long I get to eat something with it."

"Naturally." He rose from the chair, sifting through his bag until he found what he wanted. After a moment, he pulled out a cloth-wrapped bundle and placed it in my hands, setting his extra waterskin beside me. "Bread and cheese. Not much, but it'll keep you going."

I unwrapped the parcel and took a bite of the bread, its texture dense but tolerable. "Thanks," I muttered, glancing at him briefly. The chill still lingered, but the blanket and food made it better.

Amadeus settled back into his chair. "How did it go with Wallace?"

"It went," I replied.

"I need more of an answer than that, please."

I sighed. "He's not as much of an enemy or an idiot as I thought. He's angry, sure—he has every right to be—but he doesn't hate me. At least, that's what he said."

"Sounds like progress. What does he want from you?"

"For me to prove myself to the people. He said if I can show them I'm serious about fixing things, he'll stop speaking against me and give me his loyalty."

"And if you can't?"

"Then I'll lose the last chance I have to bring this city back under my rule. Wallace will keep control, and I'll walk away empty-handed."

"It's a clear goal, Theo. You know what he expects from you."

"I do. Whether I can meet those expectations is another matter."

"You've done things far more difficult." He looked down at me seriously. "You just have to speak honestly. The people might not be ready to forgive you, but they'll hear you if you're genuine. Wallace saw that much in you; he wouldn't have given you the chance otherwise."

I looked down at the cheese in my hand, small and pale in the dim light of the tent. "Words don't rebuild what I let crumble."

"No, they don't. They lay the foundation."

I finished the food he'd given me and drank some water, letting the silence drag on. I brushed my hands together to get rid of the breadcrumbs and lay on the cot, pulling the blanket tight around myself. "Wake me at sunrise if I'm not already awake, Amadeus."

He furrowed his brow. "I think you need a little more sleep than that, Theo."

I closed my eyes. "Nope. That's plenty."

CHAPTER SIX

Morning crept in, pale and sluggish, pulling me from my restless sleep. The first light slanted through the tent's seams, turning the shadows soft and gray. I sat up and the air was cold against my skin. I shivered briefly and went outside to see a fire crackling faintly. Amadeus stood over it, stirring something in a pot.

"You're up," he said without turning around.

"Sure am. I couldn't stay asleep."

Isaiah was there, his armor catching the weak morning light. He stood at the edge of the camp, his eyes on the horizon. Ambrose must not have been awake yet. "You're awake early," I said.

"So are you," he replied.

"Touché."

He rolled his eyes. "Wallace didn't send any instructions, did he?"

"No, nothing specific."

"Then what's the plan? Or are we working on guesswork?"

"Both, maybe. You know this city better than I do. What's the state of things?"

"Wary. They don't trust you yet. They aren't completely closed off, though. You've got a narrow chance to show them you're not here to lecture or demand anything."

"How do I do that?"

"Start small. They're tired of speeches and promises. They want to see you do something."

Amadeus handed me a bowl of porridge, its warmth comfortable in my hands. "He's right. If you want to rebuild trust, start with something tangible. There's plenty in Lirvanth that needs fixing."

I stared into the bowl, the porridge thick and unappealing. "I'm not a builder, Amadeus."

"You're not, but you've got two hands just like they do. Work beside them, not over them. Trust starts where they can see it."

I set the bowl down. "Do you think working alongside them is all it'll take?"

"It's better than doing nothing," Ambrose replied as he stepped out of a tent and took my forgotten breakfast. "Nothing's never been your way, Theo."

I stood up and pushed a hand through my hair. "Fine. We'll start with the ruins. Tell Wallace to gather anyone willing to work. I'll meet them in the center of town."

My captain arched a brow. “You’re serious?”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I weren’t.”

Isaiah nodded and headed toward the city, where I knew he meant to find Wallace’s house. Amadeus lingered by the fire with Ambrose, who was happily eating my porridge. I noticed the archer’s eyes on me.

“What is it?”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I thought it over for a moment. I did believe he’d be a huge help, but I also knew it was unnecessary. Perhaps I’d like to have him along, but I didn’t think the people would appreciate it. “I don’t think so but thank you. I’ll send for you when I need you.”

He nodded as I walked deeper into town, the ashes thick in the morning air. I imagined Lirvanth must have been a much greater two cities in their prime, when I was younger. When I was oblivious to my father’s handy work in letting his own country burn and rot. He had done a fantastic job of protecting himself up until he was murdered before my eyes. I wouldn’t say I missed the man, but I was sorry he was gone. Despite our frequent quarreling, he had still been my father and there was an empty space left in my heart. Amadeus was beginning to fill it, though. Amadeus was a good man, and a wonderful replacement for my late father. Truly, I didn’t give the man enough credit for how much he had come to mean to me in such a short amount of time. A lot, I can tell you that. If ever he were to die, I wasn’t sure I’d handle it nearly as well as my real father’s death, but I prayed that day was a long way away.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and arrived in the center of town, noticing a good-sized crowd of peopled there, waiting. Their expressions were as dull as the gray sky overhead and there was no hope in those eyes. I couldn’t keep looking at them, so I turned to the center of the crowd where Wallace stood. He noticed me as well and walked to stand beside me.

“You’re late,” he muttered.

“I’m early.”

“You’re late to their trust,” he replied in a low voice only I could hear. “Don’t waste what’s left of it.”

I nodded, stepping forward until I faced the gathered crowd. Their eyes bore into me, heavy and unrelenting. “I know this isn’t what you wanted. Another king standing here, promising you something better. I know words don’t fix anything, and they certainly don’t rebuild what’s been lost.”

A man in the back scoffed. “Then why are you here, if not for promises?”

“I’m here to listen. To understand what Lirvanth needs, not just from its ruler but from its people. I won’t pretend I can fix everything overnight, but I’ll start here, with you.”

“You think we need a king to tell us how to rebuild our lives? You think you can fix what’s already broken beyond repair?”

“No, but I think I can help. I can stand beside you as someone who knows what it’s like to lose everything, to lose people you care about.”

The murmurs that followed weren’t warm, but they weren’t outright rejection either. That was enough for me. I stepped back and allowed Wallace to stand beside me again.

The crowd was dispersing as he said quietly, “That wasn’t awful.”

“I’ll take that as high praise,” I mumbled.

He grinned and followed the crowd. I watched him go and then followed them further into the city as well. We walked deeper into the heart of the town, passing abandoned buildings, their windows shattered and doors missing. A few people lingered by the remains of what used to be a bustling marketplace. They didn’t look up as I approached, but there was a quiet understanding among them that I wasn’t there simply to pass through.

Earlier that morning, Wallace had listed a few places where Lirvanth had been hit the hardest, where the rebuilding had to start, and I meant to do what I could.

I stopped at a collapsed building, its roof gone with the floor below barely intact. A couple people were picking through the wreckage, salvaging what they could. A woman, her face tired and worn, paused as I walked closer. She gave me a cautious look, an expression that was becoming more and more familiar. I ignored it and gestured toward the work they were doing.

“Do you want any help?” I asked.

She shook her head. “We’ll manage.”

“I’ll stay out of your way then,” I said, taking a few steps back. “If you need more hands though, I’ve got them.”

I turned away and pulled my arms around myself, the morning air colder than it probably should have been. Even as I spent the next hours moving from one spot to another, doing what I could, I didn’t get warm. I helped clear rubble, I fetched water, I carried whatever needed to be carried, despite my worsening ailment.

At midday, I stopped at a small courtyard where a few men were digging through the dirt, trying to salvage what was left of a well. The ground had shifted in places, and I could tell they were unsure whether continuing to dig deeper was even safe.

"What are you looking for?" I asked them.

One of the men, older than the rest, stood and wiped his brow. "The well's been dry for a while now. Might be buried under some of this rubble, but it's worth trying. We can't keep hauling water from the sea. It's too far."

I nodded. "Mind if I help?"

He looked me over and shrugged. "Got no reason to stop you."

I knelt down beside them and took a shovel. It was strange at first, but they didn't say anything, so I kept at it. I focused on digging. We worked in silence, the only sound the scrape of metal against earth. As the sun moved through the sky, the heat of the day started to weigh on the other men. I was still a little chilly, despite the sweat on my brow. Hours passed that way, the sun dipping lower, casting longer shadows. The well began to take shape again beneath the dirt after it was nearly dark. Slowly, painstakingly, we made progress.

Around late afternoon, I took a break and leaned against a nearby wall, wiping the sweat from my forehead and wishing I hadn't let Ambrose talk me into leaving my cloak. Amadeus came to stand beside me, arms over his chest.

"Cold?"

There was no point in lying to the man. "A little."

He shed his cloak and handed it to me. "Theo, you worry me."

I raised an eyebrow as I pulled the cloak securely around my shoulders. "Oh?"

"Don't sound so surprised. It's the temperature of the sun out here, and you're standing there telling me you're cold."

I coughed lightly. "What's wrong with that?"

"You should be sweating."

"I am."

"Fine. You should be hot, not cold." He sighed and looked at me pointedly. "I think you're getting worse."

"My stubbornness or my condition?"

"Both, but most concerningly your condition. I got a letter today saying that Seabert is at the castle. When the day is done, you should leave."

"What if Wallace hasn't given me his loyalty?"

"Too bad."

I shook my head and returned to dig, but in my brief absence the men had finished digging it up. The water flowed steadily, and I watched people gather around to drink from it for the first time in weeks. I smiled and started toward the tents, letting my mind wander. I noted the darkening skies overhead and wondered whether I would see Wallace again that night.

When I returned to the camp, Amadeus was there with Ambrose and Isaiah. The fire was burning low, a welcome warmth as I sat near it. Someone put bread in my hands, and I nibbled at it, but I didn't really eat it. I wasn't in the mood for food. I was exhausted and cold, as I typically was.

Wallace sat beside me. "Got a minute?"

"Sure."

"You've been doing well, Theophilus, I'll give you that. Better than I expected from someone like you."

I rolled my eyes at that. "You flatter me," I replied, my tone thick with sarcasm.

"I have watched Feruneth tear itself apart, watched it lose everything it once had. Lirvanth, well, I've been here long enough to see how the people feel about things. They're tired of being forgotten, of being pushed aside. They want more than words. They need someone who can actually make things happen."

"Are you saying that's me?"

"I'm saying that you're the one who can make it happen, yes. I'm tired of waiting for someone else to take the lead. Lirvanth is yours. I'm not here to protect it from you anymore. You want my loyalty?" He lowered himself into a bow. "You've got it. All of it."

"It seems you did that too easily."

"What do you mean?"

"I barely did anything, Wallace."

"But you did something. That's more than you've been doing. Besides, I'm sick of being the king of a city that already has a better king. I want to work for you, Your Majesty."

I cringed at the title. "Well, the first step to being in my good graces is to never call me that."

"Done. What can I do for you?"

I thought he was rather straight forward. "I don't have anything you can do, Wallace. I have everyone I need at the castle. Why don't you stay here?"

He scowled. "In case you've failed to notice, this place is falling

apart at the seams. I'd much rather live in a castle that's still standing."

I suddenly realized that perhaps this man had given me his loyalty only to ask for something in return. I blew out a breath. "Fine. Come with me to the castle and join my council. For now, that is all I can promise."

"Thank you, my king."

"Yeah, don't mention it," I muttered.

I thought that went well, and it was far easier than I had anticipated. I supposed it was a win-win.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The following morning, the camp stirred with the sluggish energy of people who had grown used to the strain of survival. The fire had burned to embers during the night, and the scent of ash lingered in the air. Wallace was already awake, organizing a small group to gather supplies for the journey back to the castle. I wasn't sure how I felt about him tagging along, but I couldn't deny that having someone with his leadership experience might prove useful—if he could curb his arrogance.

Amadeus placed a satchel in my hands and helped me onto Diamond's back before mounting his own mare. "Next time, pack something for yourself."

I snorted. "Yeah, right. Thank you."

He rolled his eyes as Ambrose joined us, though he did not mount his horse. In fact, the first thing he did was hand me my own cloak, as I'd been wearing Amadeus's for the past few hours. I gave my warden his cloak and fastened mine around my shoulders. "Theo, the people here have a little faith in you again. Even if it's small and fragile, it's something. Don't squander it."

"I'll see what I can do," I said, taking Diamond's reins in my hands. "Keep things steady for me, Ambrose."

Wallace rode up beside me as I was about to give the order for everyone to follow me. "You know, you could do worse than Ambrose and Amadeus. They'd make fine advisors."

"They already are, Wallace. I'd be lost without them."

He didn't have an answer for that, so I called everyone to follow me, making sure Amadeus rode beside me. I was afraid Wallace might have taken that place, and I didn't want to hear the man rant. Our ride back home was uneventful, which is why there isn't going to be a detailed description of it. Here's the basis: We rode for hours on the dirt roads and didn't stop until we were there. Wallace spent most of the time pointing out areas where Lirvanth's roads and infrastructure had fallen into disrepair. Honestly, it was a miracle I hadn't shoved the man off his horse and rode the rest of the way without him.

By the time we reached the castle gates, the sun was beginning its descent. The sight of the familiar white stone walls should have brought comfort, but instead it only reminded me of how much still needed to be done. As we entered the courtyard, Seabert was there, waiting for me. His weathered face betrayed little emotion, as per usual, but I saw the look in his eyes. It concerned me, to say the

least. I also saw the way he studied me, the slump in my shoulders, the clear exhaustion. I knew I wasn't hiding it very well.

"King Theophilus," he said, inclining his head. "You look terrible."

Those were the very first words the man had said to me since I'd been crowned king. I dismounted my horse with a groan. "Nice to see you too, Bert."

He gestured toward the main hall. "We should talk. There's a lot to discuss."

Wallace followed Amadeus and me, his presence a touch annoying. I said nothing to the man as we entered the warmth of the hall, though I did realize how cold I had been during the journey. The fire in the hearth was a welcome reprieve, but it did little to dispel the chill in my bones.

Seabert wasted no time. "I've been reviewing the reports from outlying regions, as I had nothing to do while I waited for you to get back. The situation is worse than you might've thought. Crops are failing, supplies are dwindling, and the people are losing faith. If you don't act decisively, there's going to be an uprising."

"I am well aware of that," I replied, sinking into a chair. "What do you suggest?"

"Immediate relief efforts. You need to redirect resources to the most affected areas. That means rationing here at the castle and cutting back on non-essential expenditures. It won't be popular, but it's necessary."

I nodded. "Do it. Start organizing a council meeting. I want representatives from Lirvanth, from Veeran, from whatever other cities there are in the west. I need to hear directly from my people."

Amadeus furrowed his brow. "Veeran is in the east, you know."

I scowled at him. "I know that. I want to know how little they think of me. If anyone starts a rebellion, it'll be them."

Wallace spoke next. "You're really going to let the people have a say?"

"Yes. It isn't just my kingdom. It belongs to anyone who calls it home."

"You're starting to sound like a leader, Theo," Amadeus said.

I sighed. "Let's hope I can act like it too."

There was silence for a time, and then Seabert spoke again. "I need to speak with the two of you," he said, glancing between my warden and me. "Privately."

I exchanged a glance with Amadeus before leaving Wallace and following Seabert down a quieter corridor that took us into the

empty throne room. He gestured for us to enter and the moment we were inside, he took us across the room to the far corner where my room was, but we did not go in there. Seabert leaned against the door before turning to me.

"Amadeus was right, Theo. You're being poisoned."

I blinked, stunned. "What?"

"Your chills, your exhaustion, your inability to recover—they're not the result of overwork or illness. The symptoms align with a slow-acting toxin. Someone has been administering it carefully, likely in your food or drink. They're counting on it wearing you down over time, making your death appear natural."

Amadeus's jaw tightened as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I knew it, and yet here we are with no leads on who's responsible."

I shook my head. "I don't believe this. This is ridiculous. If someone was poisoning me, wouldn't I be . . . Worse?"

"You should be. The fact that you're still functioning is purely from your stubbornness, but make no mistake. This poison is killing you."

"No. You're wrong. This is just the plague, or exhaustion. That's all. You're both crazy people."

Seabert stepped forward, his face sad. I hated the pity I saw in his eyes. "I know that it's hard to accept, Theo, but you need to face the truth. I've already taken steps to ensure your meals and water are handled by trusted hands. Until we know who's responsible, we can't take any chances." I opened my mouth to argue further, but Seabert's expression darkened. "There's more. Something else you need to know."

"What is it?" I asked, already exasperated with him.

"It's about your sister," he said.

I narrowed my eyes. "What about her?"

When Seabert hesitated, I knew. I knew in that moment exactly what he was about to say, and it crushed me. "She's dead, my king. Liesel is gone."

"No," I breathed. "That isn't true."

"I wish it wasn't, but it is. She died here, in the castle."

"You're lying. Why would you say something like that? Why—"

"Theo," Amadeus said softly, but I ignored him.

"You're lying to me, Seabert. Why are you lying to me?"

He looked at me sadly. "I'm not lying, Theo. Come with me."

Without waiting for my response, he turned and opened the door to my own bedroom. I didn't want to follow him, didn't want to

see whatever he intended to show me, but my feet moved anyway. Amadeus stood beside me as I walked into the room, probably to catch me if I stumbled. The breath left my lungs entirely when I stood before the bed with Seabert and Amadeus on either side of me.

My room was warm and quiet, though it shouldn't have been. I felt no warmth from the fire nor from the candles. The room should have been as cold as the figure lying in the bed, covered with the little red blanket she always had. She was still and peaceful, and I could almost believe that she was only sleeping. Almost. If not for the absence of a rising and falling chest, I would have asked Seabert to leave my castle for saying something like that, but she wasn't breathing because she couldn't.

"Lici," I breathed.

She didn't move. She didn't wake. Her face was too pale, the shadows beneath her eyes spoke of a suffering I hadn't been there to ease with her favorite song. I dropped to my knees beside the bed, my fingers trembling as I touched her cold hand.

"No," I whispered. "This isn't real. This—She can't be—"

Seabert's voice was soft but unrelenting. "She's gone. I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "Why didn't anyone tell me? Why didn't—" My voice broke, and I dropped my head in my hands.

Amadeus knelt beside me, his hand on my arm. "Theo, I'm so sorry."

His words felt like ash in the air. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All I could do was sit there pitifully in a miserable heap.

Seabert stood by the door, his head bowed. "I didn't want you to find out like this, but you needed to know."

I wanted so badly to scream at him, to shake my sister awake and see her smile when she saw me, but I couldn't. It wouldn't have done anything anyway. She wasn't breathing and no amount of shaking or screaming would wake her. She was just dead, and she'd left me with a heart in pieces.

I reached out to touch her hands again, hoping, praying, for some spark of warmth. There was none. The coldness of her skin seeped into me like the poison Seabert swore was in my veins.

"This isn't real. She just—She's asleep. That's all. She's asleep, and she'll wake up."

"Theo," Amadeus said. I didn't miss the firmness in his tone.

"She's fine. She's fine, Amadeus. Seabert's wrong. He's wrong about all of this."

Amadeus sighed and shook his head. "Theo, listen to me—"

"No," I snapped, pulling my arm away. I stood up and began to pace the room. "This doesn't make sense. How could she—Why didn't anyone tell me sooner? How—"

Amadeus rose to his feet and took my arm again, spinning me around to face him. "Stop it, Theo."

I tried to pull away, but he didn't let go. "Amadeus, let me go."

"Not until you listen to me," he said sharply, raising his voice.

"I don't need to listen to you! I need to—"

Before I could finish, my warden dragged me out of the room and into the throne room, where I could no longer see my sister. He shut the door behind us and gave me a hard look. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded.

"I—She—"

"Stop. Just stop." He held up a hand to stop me from saying anything further. "No. You don't get to talk right now. Not until you hear me out."

I clenched my jaw. "You don't understand, Amadeus—"

He slapped me then. For a moment, all I could do was stare at him in stunned silence. My cheek stung, but the sudden jolt seemed to have done whatever he was hoping it would do. I stopped talking all right.

Amadeus let his hand fall to his side and blew out a deep breath. "Are you done acting like a fool?" I didn't say anything. "I get it, Theo. You're hurting and you're angry, but throwing a tantrum isn't going to bring her back and it sure as hell isn't going to help anyone."

I massaged my cheek. "You hit me," I said quietly.

"Because you weren't listening. I'll do it again if I have to."

I glared at him, but there was no heat behind it. I knew he was right. Besides, I'd once said that he had permission to slap some sense into me, and that was all he'd done.

"Look, I'm sorry about Lici. I really am, but dammit Theo, you need to pull yourself together. Your people need you. This kingdom is barely holding on as it is. If you act like this, it will fall apart. Is that what you want? Do you want her death to be meaningless?" He pulled my crown from his satchel and held it up. "Do you want this to be nothing more than a decoration?"

I sighed, running a hand down my face wearily. "No, I don't want any of that."

"Then act like a king, Theo." He gave me the crown. "For all our sakes and sanity, please stop acting like this."

I rubbed my eyes and sat heavily on the throne, setting the crown on the arm. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just . . . She's dead, Amadeus."

"I know, and your whole kingdom will die too if you keep this up."

"What should I do then?"

"Go to the council meeting. Let them talk."

I looked at him. "And the poison?"

"I'll talk to Seabert. I'm sure he can handle it."

"What do I do when the council is adjourned?"

He smiled at that. "Sleep, my king. For once, just sleep."

I couldn't help the small smile that appeared on my face as well. "Very well. Come get me as soon as they're ready for me."

He nodded. "Of course."

I watched him turn on his heel and leave me to sit in the throne doing absolutely nothing. I held my head in my hands and let out a heavy sigh. My thoughts were scattered, and I couldn't focus on any one thing for too long. Not when everything felt . . . Wrong.

The door opened with a soft creak, and I didn't have to look up to know who it was.

"I didn't think you'd still be here," Ria said, her voice carrying a mix of concern and something else. Perhaps disappointment, I couldn't tell. I didn't look up either.

"I'm here because I want to be," I replied.

Her footsteps were barely audible against the stone as she walked deeper into the room. "Theo, you can't keep doing this to yourself. You need rest."

"I'm fine," I muttered. "Fine enough."

"You aren't fine. Not even close. This isn't something you can fix by sitting there and pouting. You need help. If not mine, then let Amadeus—"

"Amadeus is helping me by doing exactly as I asked him to. He can't do anything more than he's already doing."

"Theo, I can't marry you like this. Not until you're well."

"You made that clear before." I said flatly. "I'm not asking you to anymore. I'm not asking for anything."

I could feel her gaze on me, even though I still hadn't looked up. "You don't have to ask. I won't stand by while you . . . I don't know. While you let this happen to yourself. It's not right."

I looked at her then, meeting her weary gaze. "While I *let* this happen to myself?" I asked.

"You aren't doing anything to stop it, Theo."

"Then all the times I drank your tea were for nothing? All those times I drank whatever herbal tinctures you gave me without questioning it? That was doing nothing? If that's your definition of doing nothing, then I would love to know what it looks like to actually be doing something."

She sighed heavily and came to sit on the unoccupied arm of the throne. "I didn't mean it like that. I only meant that you aren't doing anything to help yourself now. You're sitting here sulking and depressed."

I gave her a pointed look. "I'm not sulking, and I'm not depressed. All I'm doing is waiting for Amadeus to come and tell me the council is ready. Aside from that, I trust Seabert knows what he's doing. If he doesn't, well, I'm not dead yet."

"You will be if you keep acting like this."

"That's what I keep hearing."

"Then maybe you should listen, Theo. I don't want to see you dead. No one does."

I snorted. "If that were true, I wouldn't be poisoned, Ria. In fact, I wouldn't be in this situation at all."

"Maybe so, but my point is that you should get some rest." She rose from her place on the arm of the throne, pausing as though she might speak again, but she didn't. She leaned down and pressed a light kiss on my forehead. "Just . . . Get some sleep and you'll figure it out like you always do." With that, she turned away, her footsteps echoing softly in the large room, leaving me alone with nothing but the crackle of the fire and my own abysmal thoughts.

My head fell back against the throne and I stared at the vaulted ceiling. My gaze drifted to the empty room around me, the stone walls a reminder of my own isolation; the isolation that came with power. The throne underneath me wasn't uncomfortable, but I didn't really fit in it well—like a suit tailored for someone else. Perhaps my sister had been right. She had looked at me with sad eyes more than once and asked why I didn't ever look happy. I was happy, or I had been. I wasn't sure I would call myself happy now, not with her lying in my bed without breath. Despite her absurdities, she had also been completely reasonable. More reasonable than I was; of that I was certain.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts. There was so much to do and so little time to do it. Or maybe I just wasn't using my time wisely and there was more than I thought.

There were resources to allocate, alliances to mend, faith to restore. Then there was the poison, a gradual threat that had wormed its way into my body, leaving me weaker with every passing day. Amadeus had been absolutely right. I felt it then, in the throne, the persistent ache in my limbs and the chill that never went away. Someone wanted me dead, and they were horribly patient.

The crown caught my eye, resting on the arm of the throne, its metal gleaming faintly in the firelight. I thought it odd how something so small could mean so much. It meant nothing to me, but it was everything to my people. I could just be a citizen without it, but with it on my head I was someone greater than them. Someone they thought they should respect or go to war with. Someone to lead them. I wish I could see that in myself. All I saw was a broken heart and a will that was crumbling. Maybe that's dramatic and maybe I was just being stupid, but I never had wanted the throne, and I had never wanted my father's crown or the kingdom. I was making a mess of things. I felt like everything I touched fell apart or started unraveling. Perhaps it was I who was unraveling.

A shaky breath escaped me as I closed my eyes. Ria had been right about one thing: Sulking wouldn't change anything. However, it felt peaceful, and peace was a rare commodity in those days. Between poisoning, uprisings, and the increasingly sharp tongue of Amadeus, I was starting to think I'd taken a wrong turn somewhere in my life. I probably could have made it as a baker. Bakers didn't deal with assassinations or councils or the unnerving realization that their closest friends were the only reason the kingdom wasn't already in flames. Yes, there might've been the occasional issue with over-risen dough, but I could have handled that with closed eyes. Probably.

An amusing thought crossed my mind: What if the poisoner was someone in the council? They'd likely give me a speech about loyalty while slipping arsenic into my tea. I would have to give them points for creativity, at least. My sulking mood, I realized, had taken a turn toward insanity. Better than despair, but still far from productive. I wasn't sure I should be left alone for extended amounts of time anymore. I might drive myself crazy.

I shook my head at myself and listened to the fire in the hearth, watching the shadows dance along the white walls. For a moment, their dance was almost soothing, hypnotic. Almost. There was something cruel about fire. It consumed, destroyed, and left nothing but ash in its wake. It was an apt metaphor of my life lately—a constant blaze threatening to burn everything down. The irony

wasn't lost on me. I was meant to be the one keeping the fire of the kingdom alive, ensuring it didn't sputter out. No matter the amount of times I was assured that I was the only thing holding it together though, I knew they were lies. Words meant to console. I was fanning the flames, one poor decision at a time.

Leaning forward, I shifted in the throne. It felt strange, the seat of power. It wasn't designed for comfort, nor the kind of introspection I seemed to spend most of my time doing these days. Perhaps that was the point, no ruler should grow too comfortable lest they forget their responsibilities. The longer I sat there, the more I felt like the throne was a trap. One that bound me in place while the world around me spun out of control. I couldn't escape it, even if I wanted to. And part of me did want to. Desperately.

My tilted head back again and I looked at nothing. The carvings above me depicted scenes of triumph: Battles won, treaties forged, alliances sealed with grand ceremonies. They were meant to inspire, I supposed, but all they did was remind me of how far I was from achieving anything remotely worthy of such praise. Triumph was a foreign concept at this point, something distant and unattainable. What did it even mean to win when every victory seemed to come at the cost of something irreplaceable? My kingdom was crumbling, my sister was gone, and my body betrayed me with every breath. Triumph? No, all I had was survival. Even that was a farfetched hope.

A soft knock against the wall interrupted my spiraling thoughts, definitely for the best. Amadeus entered; his expression carefully neutral. There was a frown on his lips, I noted.

"They're ready for you, Theo," he said as he walked over to stand by the throne.

I looked up at him, resting my chin on my hand. "Are they, now? Ready to tell me how incompetent I am, or just ready to argue over whose city gets more bread?"

My warden raised an eyebrow. "A hint of sarcasm?"

"Only a hint? I need to work on that." I sighed and pushed myself up from the throne. "Fine, but if Wallace starts one of his speeches, I'm holding you personally responsible for not gagging him first."

He smiled. "I'll bring a cloth next time."

"Excellent idea. Now, let's go before I decide the best course of action is to abdicate and become a baker."

Amadeus laughed, and it nearly made me smile in return. We left the throne room and walked down the corridor. The flickering

torchlight cast long shadows on the walls, as always. I glanced at my warden briefly, wondering if he thought this would go well. I took his arm to stop him before we went into the council chamber.

"Thank you, Amadeus."

"What for?"

"Sticking around. Slapping some sense into me. Take your pick."

"Always, my king."

That being said, I pushed open the door to the council chamber and stepped inside. The room was buzzing with voices, representatives from every corner of Feruneth gathered around the long, polished table at its center. They hushed as I entered, their eyes turning toward me with a mixture of expectation, skepticism, and barely concealed irritation.

Amadeus followed close behind, his presence reassuring. He leaned in slightly as we made our way to the head of the table. "Try not to roll your eyes too much, or they'll think you're mocking them."

"Duly noted," I muttered under my breath, managing to resist rolling them right then and there. I took my seat at the head of the table, resting my hands on the cool wood. I kept my expression dull to match all of theirs. Amadeus sat down to my right, his gaze sweeping over the assembly like a hawk assessing its prey. "Ladies and gentlemen," I began, my voice carrying rather nicely. Nicely enough to silence the lingering whispers anyway. "Thank you for gathering on such short notice. I know your time is valuable, but the matters at hand are urgent. Lirvanth and Veeran are on the brink, and we must act decisively if we are to save them."

A representative from the eastern province, a stout man with a beard, spoke first. Bannon, I believe his name was. "King Theophilus, with all due respect, the people of Veeran have been neglected for too long. If resources are to be allocated, they must go where they are most needed."

"Which is precisely why they should go to Lirvanth." This from a woman of the western reaches, I assumed. "The heart of the kingdom is faltering. Without it, the rest of us won't stand a chance."

I didn't know when Lirvanth had become the heart of the kingdom, but I kept my mouth shut as the room erupted into a cacophony of voices. I leaned back in my chair and sighed softly. This was nothing less than I'd expected. Bickering, accusations, and no clear solutions.

The archer leaned in again, his voice low. "Shall I gag Wallace

now or wait?"

I couldn't help the smile that shone on my lips. "Let's see how long he lasts before his first lecture."

Then, as though summoned by my words, Wallace rose to his feet. "If I may, my king, the problem lies not in the distribution of resources but in the lack of proper leadership. The people need to see strength and stability from their king. Without it, no amount of bread or grain will keep the kingdom together."

I barely suppressed a groan. I stood, my chair scraping against the floor as I did. The room fell silent in an instant and they all turned to me. "Wallace, your concerns are noted, but leadership isn't about posturing or empty gestures. It's about action. That's why we're here—to act, not to argue."

The woman from the west nodded in approval, while the man from Veeran crossed his arms, clearly unimpressed. I pressed on, addressing the room as a whole. "We will allocate resources to the regions in most need, starting with those hit hardest by the failing crops. Representatives from each province will work with Captain Edevane and my advisors to ensure fair distribution. Additionally, we'll launch an investigation into the causes of the shortages. This isn't just about survival; it's about finding solutions that last."

A murmur of general agreement rippled through the room, though I could still see doubt lingering in some faces. That was fine. Doubt was easier to deal with than outright rebellion.

Amadeus tapped my arm lightly. "Well said."

"Thanks," I whispered. "Now let's see if they actually listen."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The meeting dragged on, a blur of tentative agreements. By the time it was over, I felt like I'd aged another ten years. The representatives filed out one by one, some offering polite nods, others ignoring me entirely. As the last one of them left, I slumped into my chair and let out a long, weary sigh. The warden stayed behind, leaning casually against the table.

"Well?" he asked, an amused expression plastered on his face. "How do you think you did?"

"I didn't throw Wallace out a window, so I'd call it a win," I replied dryly.

"High standards you've set for yourself, Theo."

"Someone has to. Tell me honestly, Amadeus. Do you think we stand a chance?"

His expression grew serious. "We do, but only if you keep doing what you're doing. Listening to your people and making the hard choices no one else will."

I detected no doubt in the man's eyes. "Thank you. Again. For everything." He bowed his head and turned to leave, but I called after him before he could. "Wait."

"What is it?"

"My crown is on the throne. Take it and keep it with you, please. If I'm going to sleep, I don't want it anywhere in my vicinity."

"What if I decide to sell it?"

I rolled my eyes then. "I have faith that you won't, and you're the only one I trust to keep it safe."

"Fair enough. Get some rest, Theo."

I watched him go, sinking deeper into the chair. Sleep. Amadeus was right, as usual. I needed desperately to rest, but it was elusive. Every time I closed my eyes there was too much on my mind for sleep. With Lici gone, I wasn't sure I'd ever sleep again. Not really, anyway.

The corridor outside the council chamber was silent as I made my way to my quarters. The people I passed bowed their heads, murmuring polite greetings that I barely registered. When I reached my room, I paused. My hand hovered on the handle before I pushed it open, stepping inside. The fire in the hearth had burned low, casting a dim orange glow across the room. My sister's blanket was folded neatly at the foot of the bed, a cruel reminder of what was missing.

I couldn't bring myself to move toward the bed, rather I

collapsed into the chair by the fire. My head fell into my hands, and I stayed like that for a long time, letting the quiet surround me. The room seemed colder now, the absence of her presence palpable. I was close to sleep when a knock shattered the silence. I straightened and let out a breath. For a fleeting moment, some foolish part of me thought it might be Lici.

"Come in," I said, my voice hoarse.

The door opened slowly, revealing Seabert. His expression was somber as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him. In his hands, he carried a small wooden box, the kind someone might keep herbs and tinctures in. I wondered briefly whether it was Wisteria's, but the thought was fleeting, barely there.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, Theo, but I thought you should see this."

I frowned and gestured for him to approach. "What is it?"

Seabert placed the box on the small table beside me and opened it. Inside were several vials of liquid, each labeled in his precise handwriting. One, however, had no label. Its contents were a murky green that shimmered unnaturally in the firelight. "This," he said as he pointed to the unlabeled vial, "is what I found in the tea leaves you've been drinking."

"Poison?"

"It's subtle, designed to work slowly over time. You wouldn't notice the effects until it was nearly too late. I've been watching your symptoms, and I had my suspicions. I'm sorry I didn't catch it sooner. I should have come to Feruneth earlier."

I shook my head. "No, it's all right. Do you know who did it?"

"I have my theories, but nothing concrete yet. Whoever it is, they're clever. The poison is rare, expensive, and difficult to trace."

"I want this investigated immediately. Quietly. I don't want panic spreading through the castle."

"I would have it no other way. You must take care of yourself though. I've prepared an antidote, but it will take time to fully purge the poison from your system. You'll need to rest."

"Everyone seems determined to make me rest tonight."

"Well, they care about you." He set a vial in my hands. "Drink this. It's the antidote." I swallowed it while he shut the box and turned on his heel, halting at the door and glancing over his shoulder at me. "One more thing, Theo. Whoever did this, they likely won't stop. Be careful."

When he was gone, I let my head fall back into my hands.

Someone wanted me dead, of that I was sure. Why or who, I did not know. The thought of lying in my bed sickened me, so I closed my eyes and slept there in the chair.

CHAPTER NINE

The morning came too soon for my liking, soft and pale as it was, the kind of light that didn't quite banish the night before. The embers in the hearth had died entirely, leaving only the faint scent of ash in the air. I straightened and winced at the ache in my back and neck from staying hunched over that way all night. I had only just woken myself up enough to be coherent when there was a knock on the door. I figured it could only be my warden, but I still thought it a little early for that.

"Come in," I called.

Amadeus pushed the door open, his arms full of papers I prayed were not meant for me. He set them down on the small table by the window. "It's good you're up early. We have a long day ahead."

"I figured as much," I mumbled as he handed me my crown. "What's the latest disaster?"

Amadeus looked at me. "One thing at a time. First, how are you feeling?"

"Alive," I said flatly, earning a raised eyebrow from him.

"That's a start. Seabert's antidote seems to be doing its job, but you need to be careful. The poison is gradual, and so is the cure. Overexert yourself, and you could undo the progress."

"Overexert myself?" I gestured toward the stack of papers. "What do you think this is, light reading?"

"It's necessary. The council needs decisions from you. Resources, troop movements, the usual mess."

I sighed and rubbed a hand over my face. "I don't even know where to start."

"You start by trusting yourself. You've been doing this long enough to know what needs to be done."

"What if I do something wrong?"

"That's what leadership is, Theo. It's not about being perfect, it's about moving forward no matter what."

"Yeah, thanks I suppose."

"Sure, now get dressed. I'll be waiting in the council chamber. Oh, and Seabert wants to see you later. Something about testing your tolerance for the antidote."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "Just what I need, another lecture."

He smirked before walking out the door, saying over his shoulder, "Better his lectures than Wallace's. At least Seabert won't bore you to death."

I dragged myself up from the chair after the door clicked shut, dressing myself in a black tunic and dark cloak. It was, after all, the color of mourning, and I was mourning more than just my sister; I was mourning my privacy too. I pushed a hand through my hair to get it into some sort of order and left my room with a heavy heart.

The corridor outside was bustling with activity—servants hurrying to and fro, guards standing at attention, and the faint hum of voices from the lower halls. I hardly noticed the bows of obligation and murmured greetings. I just nodded in acknowledgment and continued walking. When I reached the council chamber doors, again, I pushed them open. The voices inside quieted as I entered, all eyes falling on me.

Amadeus was already seated at his usual spot, and he glanced at me as I took my seat. "Right on time," he said lightly.

I ignored him and let my gaze sweep over the assembled council. Their faces were all impassive if not impatient. "Well, let's begin. What's the most pressing matter today?"

Predictably, Wallace rose to his feet, his tall frame towering over the others. He adjusted his cloak with unnecessary flourish and despite my warden's warning yesterday, I rolled my eyes. "King Theophilus, the state of Lirvanth remains dire. If immediate action isn't taken, I fear the situation will spiral beyond recovery."

Before I could respond that I had intentions to make things better for them, Toombai from Veeran interrupted with a sharp voice. "Lirvanth isn't the only province suffering, Wallace. Veeran is being taxed beyond their means. Yet you insist your city deserves priority."

"Rightly so. Lirvanth has been the backbone of this kingdom's trade for decades. If we fall, the ripple effect will devastate the entire country."

I narrowed my eyes at that, wondering when Lirvanth had ever been considered the backbone of Feruneth. If anything, that was Weyannor, Seabert's country. We traded with them most often for weapons and things, giving them gold in return. Gold, we had plenty of. Weapons and an army that could win a war, not so much.

In any case, Toombai scoffed before I had a chance to say any of that aloud. "What use is trade when there's no food to sustain the merchants?"

The entire room began speaking at once, all of them certain their cities were more important than any other, than the country as a whole, for that matter. I let it go on for a moment, watching the chaos with growing irritation. After a time, I raised a hand, and the

din quieted down.

"Enough," I said. "Your bickering will solve nothing. We're here to find solutions, not to place blame or claim priority." Wallace opened his mouth to argue, but I gave him a look that shut him up immediately. "The fact remains that both Veeran and Lirvanth are in need of things, and we can't afford to neglect either. Captain Isaiah Edevane and my head advisor have compiled reports on the resources available to us. Let's begin there."

Amadeus handed me a stack of documents, which I flipped through quickly before addressing the room again. "We have limited supplies of grain and medical provisions. My proposal is to distribute these resources evenly between Lirvanth and Veeran among the other cities in the west who are struggling due to the Weyannorian War. There will be additional support sent to the areas that require the highest concentration of need. Furthermore, I will dispatch investigators to determine the root cause of these crises, whether from mismanagement, poor harvests, or something else entirely."

Toombai leaned forward. "Someone might be sabotaging us. I seem to recall an immature prince a few years ago."

He let the rest go unsaid, but I understood perfectly what he was implying. "If it is sabotage, it will be dealt with accordingly. For now, we will act with what we know. Are there any objections?"

Wallace cleared his throat. "King Theophilus, while I agree that both regions need support, I fear this even distribution will leave both wanting. Might I suggest prioritizing Lirvanth's trade routes? Without them, the kingdom's economy will collapse."

I raised an eyebrow. "There are scarcely any trade routes in Lirvanth. They will not be prioritized and the even distributions stand. Do you have anything more to say?"

He said nothing more, but I did not miss the scowl he gave me. I took his silence as acceptance and moved on. The next hour was filled with discussions about logistics. How best to transport supplies, which roads were safest, and what measures could be taken to prevent further crises. It was tiring work, and even more tiring to listen to them argue over and over again. I tried, I really did, to direct their attention to solutions, but too many times they ignored me and quarreled about meaningless things. By the time the meeting adjourned, it was a miracle I had not slapped every person in the room, save Amadeus and myself. They filed out one by one, some offering polite nods, others glaring at me. Only my warden lingered, his expression blank as he watched the last of them leave.

I leaned back in my chair and blew out a tired sigh. "How bad was it?" I asked.

"Better than I expected. Although Wallace might combust if Toombai interrupts him again."

"I will keep that in mind."

Amadeus crossed his arms and sobered up. "You handled it well, Theo, but I want to hear it from you. What did Toombai say to you?"

I clenched my jaw. "He implied that if the crops were being sabotaged, he wouldn't put it past me to do something like that. I clearly have yet to commend the things I did to Veeran all those years ago."

"I'm sure there will be ample time to change their minds about you. In the meantime, get some fresh air. You've been cooped up in the castle for too long."

"Are you suggesting I go frolic in the gardens?"

"If that is what it takes to keep you sane."

"Fine. If Wallace comes looking for me, tell him I've resigned and moved to Tinnober."

"If he comes looking for you, you should hear him out."

I sighed. "Why?"

"You're the one that brought him here. Ask yourself."

I stood up and shook my head. "Whatever. I'm going to find Seabert before I do anything more."

"And you're going to rest directly after that."

"Yes, yes, of course." He didn't seem satisfied, but I didn't care. Rarely was the man entirely satisfied with any of my answers. "Amadeus, I would like you to arrange a meeting with Toombai, please. In the throne room."

"You know how he feels about you. He hates you, Theo, and what happened to going to find Seabert?"

"I don't care how he feels about me," I snapped. "I need to talk to him. I need to try and fix Feruneth's relationship with Veeran. We're one country and we should act like it. Seabert can wait."

"All right. I'll arrange it, but you know what you're walking into."

I didn't give him an answer. I knew Toombai hated me, and nothing was going to change that. If there was, however, a chance to prevent his rebellion from spiraling out of control, I had to try. Lirvanth might trust me now, and it might be in the process of being rebuilt, but Veeran would take a lifetime of apologies and kind words to fix what I had done all that time ago. I wasn't sure I had that kind

of time on my hands. Where Lirvanth took a few days to gain their trust and ensure I would make things better, Veeran would take weeks of my time. I would be away from the castle indefinitely, and I didn't have the luxury to do that. There were people who counted on me to be there, always. I couldn't leave them for an excursion that I wasn't certain would change a thing.

I sighed heavily in the silence of the room and tilted my head back. I pictured a thousand different scenarios, each of them ending terribly. I didn't know why this was so important to me, but it was really stressing me out. I mean, it was just a city, wasn't it? No, it wasn't. It was my fault that people died in Veeran all those years ago, and in nine years I had done nothing, less than nothing, to fix that. To restore the trust they had lost in their own country. To repair what I had been naïve enough to break. It wore on me, day in and day out.

Toombai's disdain toward me and everything I stood for felt like something I would never outrun. I could remember him there, one of the people I'd asked the guards to arrest. It was clear as day in my mind. I knew what he thought of me. He thought I was weak, incapable of leading. Perhaps he was right. The people of Veeran had suffered because of the mistakes I made. For all the words of comfort I could offer, they wouldn't mean a thing to those who had been affected by my failures. I didn't know whether I was capable of fixing Veeran's trust in the throne. I didn't whether I had already wasted too much time. I did know that I was going to try though, even if I made a fool of myself.

I pulled myself up and stood in front of a window, the stained glass an image of some ancient war that Feruneth had won, something I cared nothing for. I looked through a clear area and absently watched the sprightly life of the castle courtyard below. They went about their day, oblivious to the danger of their country falling to pieces, burning to ashes. What right was it of mine to ask them to trust me when I had let things get this far? I had been too consumed with my own problems and insecurities to truly pay an inch of attention to what needed to be done. Now, there I was, trying to salvage what was left, as though I had a chance to reverse the damage. It wasn't that simple. No amount of talking, no amount of promises, would change the fact that I had allowed my country to grow so distant from its own cities. From itself.

I was distracted from my dismal musing when the door opened. I turned to see my warden standing in the doorway, his usual look of

frustrated concern in place.

"Toombai in waiting for you in the throne room," he said.

"I suppose I should go then."

He arched an eyebrow. "You're not concerned, are you?"

"Of course not. What could possibly go wrong?"

"With you involved, everything."

I walked out of the council chamber, glaring at him on my way out. "That was a rhetorical question."

"I know." He smiled briefly. "Try not to make things worse."

"I'll see what I can do."

I walked down the halls and found myself in the throne room sooner than I would have liked. Amadeus stood in the doorway, arms crossed, staring at nothing in particular. I ignored Toombai entirely until I was sitting on my throne. I saw no warmth in the man's gaze when I turned my attention to him, but I supposed, for me, there never had been.

"King Theophilus. I heard you've finally decided to face the consequences of your actions."

"I didn't come here to argue with you, Toombai. I came to talk. We need to sort this out."

"Sort this out? How do you plan on doing that? You've let this kingdom fall into disrepair. Crops are failing, people are revolting, and you sit up there on your throne, pretending everything's fine."

I scowled. "I know things are bad, but I am still the king. I want to stop this before it gets worse. We don't need another war, certainly not a civil war. We don't need bloodshed."

"You should have thought about that before you let this place fall apart. I'm not here to hold your hand, King Theophilus. I'm here because I want control. I want to be the king of Veeran, and I want my people to have the freedom they deserve."

"You think I don't want that too?" I asked quietly. "You think I've been sitting idly by while everything goes to hell?"

"I don't think you're incapable of leading. I think you're weak, and I think you've already caused enough trouble."

I rose from my throne. "I might not have been perfect, but I'm still trying to fix this. I don't need your respect, but I do need you to understand that we can still find a way to agree to disagree. You don't need to tear this kingdom apart to make a point, Toombai. Please."

"Don't come into Veeran. You don't belong there. You've brought us enough damage already."

"Toombai, I just want to make sure we don't destroy one another. I want peace. I do. If you really want me to make you king of Veeran, then prove it. Stop hiding behind your rebellion and take responsibility."

Toombai turned his back to me and walked away without another glance. I sank back into the throne and let out a heavy sigh. That wasn't the way I had meant for things to go. I had hoped that he might listen if I didn't yell at him that he was being an idiot and if this kingdom fell apart, I would be the only one to blame, but I'd been wrong. Perhaps I should have yelled at him and things would've been different.

Toombai was never going to let me off the hook, and that I could understand. I knew also, however, that there was still a chance. There had to be. I knew if I kept trying that we could eventually come to an understanding. I didn't expect it to happen overnight, but something had to give. He wasn't the only one hurting, after all.

I looked up, meeting my warden's gaze. His arms were still crossed, and he still had the same exact expression on his face, though perhaps more concern than frustration.

"That could've gone better," I mumbled.

Amadeus pushed himself off the doorframe and crouched in front of me. "Yes, it could've gone much better, but at least he knows you're willing to try."

"So what? He hates me, he doesn't trust me, he thinks I'm weak and because of that he's going to start a rebellion, and Veeran isn't going to be a part of Feruneth anymore."

"He might hate you, but that doesn't mean he's right about everything. Neither of you have all the answers, Theo. He'll see that one day."

I looked away from the man. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

Amadeus had the audacity to smile. "You don't want my honest opinion on that subject, my king."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Um, yes, I absolutely do. You don't get to withhold information from your king."

"Very well, just know that you asked for this. I don't want to hear any complaining or scoffing."

"Just tell me, Amadeus. I don't have all day to sit here and wait." That wasn't entirely true. I had nothing better to do with my time.

"My honest opinion is that, yes, you tend have moments of stupidity, but as a whole, I don't think you're stupid."

"Well, what *do* you think then?"

"What I think is that you're misguided. I think you don't really understand what you're doing, and because of that you do stupid things. It's the inexperience."

"That's very encouraging, Amadeus. Thank you," I said dully.

"Yes, you asked for the truth. There it is."

I rolled my eyes and stared at the wall. "What *I* think is that you're entirely too honest sometimes."

Amadeus stood and dusted off his tunic. "I take that as a compliment."

"Naturally."

There was silence between us after that, and my thoughts drifted back to the conversation I'd had with Toombai. The man was entirely too confident with himself and too unwilling to forgive. I was only twelve when those people died, after all. I had no idea what I was doing, what I should've been doing. My father had not exactly been the type of guy to teach me things like that. He was more the type to sit in a chair all day and watch me make a fool of myself.

"You're thinking too much again."

"I tend to do that when my kingdom is on the brink of ruin."

My warden sighed. "One failed conversation does not mean the end, Theo. You've planted a seed, whether Toombai wants to admit it or not. He knows now that you're not ignoring him, and you're not dismissing Veeran's suffering. That counts for something."

I wasn't so certain, but before I was able to say so, the door creaked open, and a young page hesitated at the threshold. He swallowed before saying, "King Theophilus, Seabert requests your presence. He says it's urgent." I gestured for him to leave, and he went with a quick bow.

"You were supposed to rest before seeing him."

"I was supposed to do a lot of things, Amadeus," I replied, rising to my full height. "Come on, let's not keep the old man waiting."

Amadeus didn't argue, but I could feel his disapproval radiating off him as we walked down the halls where I knew Seabert would be. The page hadn't said where he was, but I knew he would be in the Great Hall.

I was right. When we stepped into the room, Bert was standing over a cluttered table, flipping through a book with furrowed brows. He didn't look up as we entered. "You took longer than I would've liked, but I suppose that's to be expected given who I'm speaking with."

I glared at Bert and stepped further into the room. "You said it was urgent?"

Seabert looked up at me. "I did. I've been going over the antidote I gave you and comparing it to the poison that was in your system."

"And?"

"The poison was designed not to kill, but to impede, so to speak. It explains why you were able to function for so long before showing symptoms. It was meant to erode your strength over time, to make you incapable of leading effectively."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You're saying someone didn't want me dead. They just wanted me out of the way."

"Precisely. That means your enemies are playing a long game, Theo."

"Fine. Find out who's behind it and kill them."

Amadeus frowned. "Don't you want to speak to whomever it is?"

"No, I do not."

"Theo, what if it's someone you know? You would have them killed without saying anything?"

"Yes. If it is someone I know, someone I trusted, then they deserve to be killed."

"What if it were me? Would you have me killed so easily?"

I turned toward him. "Amadeus. I know it is not you."

"How? How can you be so sure it isn't me? What if it's Ambrose? Isaiah? Wisteria? Seabert, even. Theo, it could be anyone, and you would have them murdered the moment someone knows who did it?"

"I trust all of them, Amadeus, and I am certain none of them would ever wish to poison me."

"Theo, you're missing the point. I'm not saying it is one of them, or even someone you know. I'm saying *if it is* then you won't even have the option of asking them why they did it because they'll be dead."

"Amadeus, I think *you're* missing the point. It won't be someone I know so I won't have to ask them that in the first place."

Amadeus glared at me and folded his arms across his chest. "Theo, please. I need you to take this seriously for once. I can name several of your friends who could have easily, *easily*, poisoned you. You won't like it, but it'll be the truth."

"I rarely like anything you have to say for that reason."

"Is that a yes, or no?"

"No, I don't want to hear it. I trust them all with my life and I will not even consider this."

"Theo, be reasonable."

"I won't. They are innocent until proven guilty. This discussion is over. I want you to send a letter to Ambrose and Isaiah and ask them both to send reports from Lirvanth. Good afternoon to you both."

"My king, I'm only trying to help you," I heard Amadeus say as I began to leave the Great Hall.

"Accusing my friends, yourself even, of poisoning me does not help, Amadeus."

"Doesn't it? It brings you this much closer to finding out who is behind all of this. To finding out who killed your sister."

I spun around at the mention of Lici. "I will not condemn any of them and I never want to hear you suggest that one of them killed my sister. I trust them, Amadeus."

He sighed. "That is exactly why it would be so easy for them to do it."

"Because I trust them, they would kill me?"

"No, because you trust them you will not consider that they could have done it themselves."

"I don't want to hear this right now."

"Then when will you want to hear it, Theo? When one of them is near enough to kill you? When your life is already gone? When will there be a better time to hear it than now?"

"Never, Amadeus! I will never want to hear that my friends could be willing to poison me for the throne! I will never be ready to hear that, and I am not ready to hear it now."

"Theo, listen. The worst thing about betrayal is that it never comes from your enemies. It's the ones you trust, the ones you've let in, the ones who have shared your meals and walked beside you+. You refuse to see that someone in your own circle could have done this, but that's exactly why it would be so easy. A stranger would not have gotten near enough to poison you, but a friend? A friend could place the cup in your hands with a smile, and you'd drink without a second thought. You trust so deeply that you don't question, but deception has consequences. Those who spread lies and twist the truth will not escape judgment forever•. Sooner or later, the truth will come to light, and when it does, it won't just be about the poison. It will be about who you trusted to never do it."

I shook my head. "No, I won't believe that."

"You don't *want* to believe it."

"Because it isn't true! I know the people around me, Amadeus. I trust them. If I start doubting them now, then what? Do I look at every friend, every ally, and wonder whether they're waiting for the right moment to strike? That is not how I will rule, and it will not be how I live."

"That is exactly why you were an easy target."

"If I start suspecting everyone, I'll lose everything. I can't lead a kingdom if I can't even trust the people standing beside me."

"If you trust the wrong people, you won't be leading at all."

I closed my eyes briefly and let my shoulders fall. "Then what about you, Amadeus? Should I trust you?"

He smiled at me. "You already do, and that is the difference."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means I've had every opportunity to betray you, Theo. If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't be standing here asking me that question. However, trust isn't just about believing someone won't harm you. It's about believing that when the moment comes, they will stand by you. That's the kind of trust that matters, and it is the kind of trust you should be questioning."

"And you? Would you stand by me?"

He inclined his head in a bow. "Every time, my king."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing for a while. I simply stayed where I was and let the quiet linger. Finally, I said, "You know, you make it very difficult to stay irritated with you."

His smile widened. "That is my greatest skill."

I laughed softly. "And here I thought it was archery."

"Oh, no. That's merely a hobby. My true talent lies in being an insufferable voice of reason inside your head."

"I know I can trust you, but, Amadeus, if I do fail—"

"You won't."

"If I do," I repeated, "I need to know you'll be here to put things right. That you won't just watch it all fall apart."

"Theo, if you fall, I will be the one to catch you."

I nodded. "Good." That was all I needed to hear, so I gave him a tired smile and turned on my heel to find Wisteria.

CHAPTER TEN

My heart was heavy as I left the room, but I supposed that was my own doing. Perhaps Amadeus had been right about trust, but that did not mean I had to believe him. I would not stop trusting my friends simply because one of them *might* have poisoned me. I trusted them all with my life, and I refused to condemn them for something none of them could have possibly done.

The corridors of the castle were uncharacteristically quiet as I made my way toward Ria's room, my sister's old room. The thought nearly made me drop to my knees and weep. My dear little sister, who had given up her room for Ria because she begged me to let her have my room. I had agreed, of course. Now she had no room in the castle and the thought broke my heart more than it already was, if such a thing were feasible.

Something in me hoped silently that Ria wouldn't be in her room when I knocked because there was a part of me that did not wish to speak with her. I loved her, but I had been wondering lately whether she still loved me. With the poison nearly gone, I had a chance of convincing her to marry me that same night. I wanted to marry her, I wanted to live in the castle with her by my side, but that was becoming less and less likely with every passing day. She simply did not seem like she wanted that anymore, if she ever really had wanted it. In any case, I still hoped she might say yes.

I knocked lightly on the door, waiting for a response. For a long moment, there was no answer, and I thought she might not be inside. A part of me wished that were the case, that I could walk away and not have this conversation at all. However, just as I was about to turn, the door creaked open. She stood in the doorway, her blue eyes unreadable.

"Theo," she said softly.

I forced a smile. "Ria. May I come in?"

She hesitated a fraction of a second before stepping aside. "Of course."

I entered, glancing around the room. The sight of it sent a sharp pang through my chest, but I pushed it down and focused instead on Wisteria as she shut the door.

"What is it?"

"I wanted to see you. To talk."

She arched an eyebrow. "What about?"

"Us."

". . . Okay."

"I want to talk about you and me, Ria. I—" I exhaled sharply. "You told me you would not marry me until I was well. I am well now, or as close to it as I can be. I need to know. Do you still want this? Do you still want me as your husband?"

She turned away and moved toward the window. "I don't know."

I furrowed my brow. "You don't know?"

"Theo . . . A lot has happened. You were sick. Then Liesel—" She broke off and looked at me. "Everything has changed."

"I haven't and neither has our engagement. When I asked if you would marry me, you said yes, Ria, and here we still are. Unmarried. Uncertain, even. I love you, and I still want a life with you."

"I'm sorry, Theo."

I stared at her. Maybe I had expected that answer all along. Maybe I had known in my heart that she was slipping away from me long before I had the courage to ask. Still, though, I needed to hear it from her.

"Why?" I asked.

She turned back to the window. "Because I love another man."

I narrowed my eyes. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me, Ria."

I saw regret in her eyes as she turned back to me. What for, I did not know, and I do not know now. "I can't marry you, Theo."

"Because you do not love me? Because you love him?"

She exhaled slowly. "No, because I poisoned you for him."

I could not make sense of the words that had just left her lips. I could not believe what I had just heard. She didn't look away, didn't deny it. I clenched my jaw and turned my back on her. I had nothing left to say.

I barely made it three steps before a sudden, burning pain ripped through my right shoulder. I stumbled forward a step before catching myself. My breath caught when a searing heat spread down my arm. I turned my head enough to see the hilt of a dagger lodged deep in my shoulder, Wisteria's hand still resting on it.

She poisoned me and then she stabbed me. Not to end my life, but to make me suffer. All because whomever she loved had asked her to. What a lovely engagement present. I was appalled, though I did not voice it.

I sighed. I carefully lowered myself onto her bed, ignoring the blade still in my arm. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my

knees, and dropped my head into my hands. I did not speak. I did not curse her name. I said nothing. I had lost her long before that moment, I simply had not wanted to see it.

I heard my warden enter after a while. I didn't lift my head to see him; I recognized his steady gait. I felt him kneel beside me, heard his sharp intake of breath when he saw the blade. He probably saw the blood soaking into the sleeve of my tunic as well.

He didn't say anything, did not ask what happened. He reached over and pulled the blade out in one swift motion. Pain burned in my shoulder, sharp and deep, but I barely reacted. I only exhaled, letting my hands slide from my face to rest against my knees.

Then, before I could stop him, before I even thought to, Amadeus turned. He crossed the room and drove the dagger into Wisteria's chest. She gasped, leaning against the wall, her hands going to the hilt as though she might somehow undo what had just happened. There was no undoing it though. No second chances. Her lips parted and she slid to the floor and did not move again.

I didn't flinch, didn't move; I simply watched.

Amadeus let out a slow breath as he pulled the blade free and let it fall to the floor with a dull clatter. He turned back to me, his expression deadly serious.

"Why did you do that?" I whispered.

"Because you wouldn't."

I nodded slightly. That was true. He was always the one who did what I could not.

My warden sighed as he stepped toward me. I heard him tear a strip of fabric, perhaps his cloak, and then he pressed it against my shoulder. The pain sharpened, but I didn't mind. I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"She would have done worse," he muttered. "If you had let her."

I made a noncommittal sound. Perhaps she would have, perhaps not. It did not matter now.

Amadeus knelt beside me to tie the fabric tightly in place. "You should have called for me."

"And then what?" I murmured. "You would have done the same thing, only sooner."

He didn't deny it. He sat back on his heels and studied me, weighing something I did not have the strength to name.

"You should be angry," I said.

"I should be," he agreed.

"And yet, you're not."

"No."

I finally lifted my head and met his gaze. He did not look pleased with himself, but neither did he carry the precision of someone who had done this countless times. I briefly wondered what he had seen before he'd found me ages ago in the woods and saved my life. Best not to dwell on things like that.

I couldn't look at Wisteria's body anymore. It wasn't her death that bothered me, though I knew I should have been more disturbed by it. No, it was the way everything had fallen apart. The poison. Her betrayal. The endless decisions I did not want to make, but that I knew were coming.

Amadeus slid the dagger into his own belt and rose to his full height, looking at me as though he was waiting for me to speak. I did not offer him anything. "We need to leave, Theo."

I nodded and got up to follow him as he led me out of her room and down the hallways of the castle. We didn't speak again until we reached my chambers. Amadeus closed the door behind us before taking my arm and sitting me down on the bed. He didn't say anything right away, but I could feel his eyes on me, studying the wound. He went to rummage around and produced a cloth, dampening it with water.

"You're lucky she didn't aim for your heart," he said as he returned to me.

"I'm not feeling very lucky."

He grunted in response, tearing the hole in the shoulder of my tunic wider until he was able to simply rip the entire sleeve off. He dabbed at the blood that was still seeping from my shoulder. "You know, I never understood her," he said as he worked. "I never will. Why did she say no? You're a king, a damn good one. Mostly. You'd have given her everything."

I didn't answer at first, watching his hands as he carefully cleaned the injury. After a moment, I leaned back against the bed and shrugged my good shoulder. "Because she loved another man, and he asked her to poison me, so she did."

"Do you even know who this man is?"

"Nope."

"Mmm. Perhaps she never saw herself with you. As queen. As part of this life. Not everyone's built for that kind of life, Theo."

"I know that." I rubbed a hand over my face while he wiped the blood off my arm and began to wrap a bandage around my shoulder, pulling it under my armpit. "I still thought she would marry me. She

said yes, Amadeus. I loved her, and she . . . Loved another man."

"Perhaps she wasn't the person you thought she was."

I glared at him. "Yeah, no kidding."

He sighed and tied the bandage tightly before sitting beside me on the bed. He removed the bandage from my head that had been placed there after the rock incident in Lirvanth. I was sure it would just be a scar by now. "Look, I'm not saying this to make you feel worse. But perhaps it's better you found out now instead of after you'd already spent years married to her."

"I don't know if 'better' is the word I'd use."

"No, I suppose not, but at least you've got the rest of your life ahead of you. Could be worse."

"I don't feel very optimistic about the rest of my life right now."

"You don't need to keep dwelling on her, Theo."

"I'm not dwelling on her."

"Mm-hmm." He raised an eyebrow. "You're sulking."

"I am not sulking."

"Yes, you are. Theo, you've been through hell, but you need to rest. You're wearing yourself thin."

"I'm fine."

"You're *not* fine. If you don't rest, you're going to make yourself sick again. Or worse, you're going to snap at someone who doesn't deserve it."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Fine, maybe I'll sleep, but don't expect me to feel better about any of this by tomorrow."

"I'm not expecting miracles, and a good night's sleep won't hurt."

"I don't know how to sleep."

"Allow me to teach you. Step one: Get in bed. Step two: Stay in bed. Step three: Actually sleep."

I gave the man a dry look. "That's your expert advice?"

"You've never really followed those steps, my king."

I sighed but lay back on the bed anyway. "Fine, but if this doesn't work, I'm blaming you."

"I'll take full responsibility," he said, heading for the door. "Now get some rest, Theo. For once."

I muttered something ugly under my breath, and he chuckled as he shut the door behind him. The room was quiet after he left, aside from the faint crackling of the dying fire. I lay there, staring at the ceiling, willing my mind to stop turning over everything that had happened. It didn't work.

I exhaled sharply and turned onto my side, shifting my arm carefully to avoid jarring my shoulder. I closed my eyes. A minute passed. Then another. I opened my eyes again with a sigh. It wasn't that easy. It never was.

I must have dozed off for a time because the next thing I knew, I was jolted awake by the sound of a knock at the door. I groaned. I sat up slowly, my shoulder protesting, and dragged myself to my feet, hoping it wasn't something important. I didn't bother to call out, rather I opened the door with a scowl on my face. I found Amadeus there. Of course he was there. He always seemed to be there.

"What do you want now, Amadeus?"

He lifted a brow and gave me a once over. "I came to say good morning and see how you were doing."

I rubbed my hands over my face. "It's morning already?"

"Yep."

"That's unfortunate."

"How are you feeling, Theo? Honestly."

"Tired and like I've been stabbed," I answered dryly.

"Aren't you ever happy about anything?"

I shrugged. "Some things, but not at this particular time, no. Why do you ask?"

"You're making it rather difficult for me to check on you, you know. I was just trying to be friendly and you're acting like I'm the worst thing you've seen all morning."

I leaned against the doorframe and crossed my arms. "You assume I've seen anything else this morning."

The warden gave me a look. "Charming as ever."

"I try." I paused for a moment, gathering my thoughts. "Is there a reason you're here, or did you just come to irritate me?"

"I thought you might be hungry." He lifted a hand, and for the first time, I noticed the plate he was holding. "Figured you wouldn't bother to eat unless someone forced you."

"And you volunteered for that noble task?"

"I drew the short straw."

I snorted but took the plate anyway. My shoulder protested the movement and Amadeus, as always, noticed.

"You should be resting."

"I was resting." I gestured toward the bed. "You're the one who woke me up."

"You need more than just sleep, Theo. You have a talent for pushing yourself till you drop."

I took a bite of whatever he'd brought me. It wasn't bad. "You sound like an old nursemaid."

"And you sound like a stubborn fool who doesn't know when to stop."

I waved my fork at him. "I know exactly when to stop. I just choose not to."

Amadeus sighed a long-suffering sigh. "Just try not to make a habit of getting stabbed, will you?"

"No promises."

"You're awful."

I grinned. "Thank you."

He didn't have a retort for that, only a tired shake of his head while he leaned against the wall. I simply kept eating, mostly because I knew he'd stand there watching until I finished.

The food was warm, which was more than I'd expected. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until the first few bites. I suppose I should have, considering how little I'd eaten the past day or two. My body was still recovering, though I hated to admit it, and every movement reminded me just how weak I felt. I was used to pushing through pain, to ignoring the ache in my bones and the exhaustion dragging me down. This was different though. This wasn't something I could brush off with a stubborn shrug.

The room was too quiet, save for the occasional scrape of my fork against the plate. I should have felt grateful for Amadeus's concern, but instead, it only remined me of how much I hated being watched over like an infant. I was, not to brag or anything, the king, after all. I wasn't supposed to need anyone hovering over me, making sure I ate, making sure I didn't collapse under the weight of my own injuries. I was meant to be the one hovering over other people, giving them orders. And yet, there I was.

Amadeus wasn't the kind of man who spoke in flowery reassurance. He was brutally honest, practical, and unfortunately persistent. He wouldn't let me wallow, no matter how much I wanted to. He wouldn't allow me to disappear behind a closed door and pretend none of this was happening. It was infuriating and it was probably exactly what I needed.

I set the empty plate aside and exhaled slowly. The day stretched ahead of me with all my duties, but there was no avoiding it. I might have wanted to stay there by the door to my room, eating, but I knew I could not. I had a throne to hold, a kingdom to keep steady, an idiot who thought he wanted to be king. I still had a lot to

look forward to, if one could call it that.

Amadeus straightened, watching as though he knew precisely what I was thinking. Sadly, he probably did. I hated that about him. "You done sulking?"

"As done as I'll ever be."

Amadeus had nothing else to say, but the look he gave me was more than enough. A silent warning that I couldn't avoid my duties forever. I didn't need the reminder. I knew already what my job entailed.

I sighed, rolling my shoulder to ease the lingering ache, and started toward the council chamber. My steps were steady, but my mind was already dreading the tedium that awaited me. The prospect of spending the next several hours listening to endless debates about grain stores and tax levies was enough to make me consider turning back, but I had no choice, and I was already bored.

When I got there, the council chamber was, to say the *very* least, stifling. The air was thick with the scent of old parchment and candle wax. Dim rays of sunlight filtered weakly through the high windows, though it did little to lift the mood of the room.

My council members were already droning on about matters I had long since stopped caring about. Amadeus sat to my right, Wallace to my left. Toombai was at the opposite end of the table, and everyone else I didn't care for sat around the ovular table. Some of them looked expectantly at me, as though waiting for me to do something of great importance. I was not inclined to oblige them.

The discussion had started with an argument over the assignment of grain stores in the southern provinces, which had suffered drought earlier in the year. It had then shifted into a long-winded debate about tariffs, then the appointment of new tax collectors, then the maintenance of city walls. Every topic bled into the next with such seamless monotony that I had lost all sense of time.

Lord Bannon was now rambling on about the necessity of a new census. "We cannot maintain accurate records of the kingdom's population without proper documentation," he was saying, oblivious to the fact that no one, least of all his king, cared. "If we do not assess the true numbers, we risk inadequate taxation, and if taxation falters, so too does the economy—"

I leaned back in my chair, suppressing a groan. My shoulder ached and my head was pounding. I was fairly certain if I had to listen to one more discussion about tax policy, I would throw myself

from the nearest window. Amadeus cleared his throat, shooting me a look that I assumed was meant to be cautionary. I ignored it.

"And what of the mercenary companies in the north?" someone asked, their voice cutting through the fog of my disinterest. "They grow bolder by the day. If we do not act soon, we will have more than mere bandits to deal with."

I didn't think we had worried about bandits in the first place, but I wisely stayed silent, listening to the new argument that began. I took that as my opportunity. I pushed my chair back, the legs scarping against the stone floor, and stood. Every head in the room turned toward me.

"I need to be anywhere but here," I announced flatly.

Wallace knit his brows together. "Theo—"

I waved a hand. "By all means, continue your discussion. I'm sure you'll reach a thrilling conclusion without me."

Toombai's expression darkened. "You would walk out on your own council?"

"I sure would."

"This is not some trivial gathering, Your Majesty. Your presence is required. Your kingdom requires it."

"I am well aware of what my kingdom requires, Toombai. At this moment, it does not require me to sit here listening to a pointless debate over numbers and bureaucracy. And don't call me Your Majesty. It displeases me greatly."

Toombai clenched his jaw. "Your father would not have abandoned his duties so readily."

I offered him a thin, humorless smile. "My father is dead."

Without another word, I turned and strode from the room, leaving behind the murmurs of discontent and the weight of their disappointment. No one, not even my warden, followed me out.

The corridor outside the council chamber was blessedly quiet, and I heard my footsteps echo off the stone walls. I didn't have any real destination in mind. I just needed to move, to get away from that suffocating room where words piled on top of one another like dead leaves, meaningless and rotting.

I didn't know where I was going. I didn't particularly care either. I just needed distance from the council, from Toombai's judgmental gaze, from Amadeus's barely concealed disappointment. The ache in my shoulder throbbed with each step, reminding me of Ria, as hapless as that is. I pressed my hand against the wound, but it did little to ease the discomfort.

Eventually, I found myself in my sister's room; my old room. The window overlooked the gardens, though it was muddled by the stained glass. The sun had climbed higher while I'd been trapped in that meeting. Its pale light caught on the frost that still clung stubbornly to the grass.

I stopped at the large window, resting my hand against the cool glass. Beyond the gardens, the training grounds stretched out, mostly empty now except a few soldiers going through the motions of their drills. I envied them. Their lives were simpler. They had orders. They followed them. No endless debates, no political maneuvering, no decisions that could alter the course of an entire kingdom. Just steel and sweat and purpose. I needed that, and a part of me longed to be out there, sword in hand, muscles straining. That life was behind me, though. I was king, whether I liked it or not. Kings didn't have the luxury of escaping into battle just to clear their heads.

Honestly, I should not have left that meeting. My father would never have done something so thoughtless. He would have sat there, listened to every torturous word, weighed each opinion carefully before making a decision. While he had been extremely quick to assume, to accuse, to throw things in my general direction, my father was always patient with his people. Most of the time. I had no such patience for anyone. I wanted things to be quick and easy. I wanted to say one word, and that was it. Things were never so simple.

I ran my fingers through my hair, feeling the familiar throb of a headache building. I couldn't keep doing this. I couldn't keep dragging myself from one crisis to the next when all of them paled in comparison to the death of my sister, of my fiancée, of my kingdom breaking apart. Something had to crack at some point, and I was afraid it was going to be me.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew me from my thoughts. I knew it wasn't Amadeus, which meant it was either a guard, servant, or Wallace. As I had just neglected the meeting, I figured it was safe to assume it would be the last of the three.

"You left in quite the hurry," Wallace said.

"Yes, I did. I needed air."

"Air. Is that what we're calling it now?" I turned to look at him when he continued speaking. "Theophilus, you cannot keep doing this."

"Doing what?" I asked, despite knowing the answer already.

He gave me a dull expression. "Running."

“I’m not running, Wallace.”

“No? Then what would you call it?”

“I call it keeping my sanity.”

Wallace said nothing about that, which I thought was wise on his part. “I’ll be in the council chamber. If you decide to join us.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I didn't answer Wallace. I just stood there, staring out the window, letting the silence hang between us until he left the room. I had no real answers, and I didn't know if I could find any, not right then. Instead, I focused on the garden outside. The stillness of it all was almost peaceful, a fantastic contrast to the chaos waiting for me inside the council chamber. The endless debates, the same arguments, the same expectations that had followed me since I took the throne.

I shook my head, attempting to rid my head of those thoughts. It didn't help. Nothing ever seemed to. The door opened while I was trying to come to a reasonable conclusion. Amadeus stepped inside, his presence familiar and, for the most part, a welcome distraction.

"Decided to leave the meeting so soon?"

I turned to face him and offered a half-smile. "I couldn't take it anymore. It's just . . . Endless. Over and over, the same things."

"I know the feeling, but you can't keep running from it, Theo. You're the king now. You don't get to sit this one out."

"I know," I muttered. "But it feels like nothing I say matters."

"Because they're not listening?"

"Because I'm not the right one to be listening to."

He didn't answer right away, rather let the silence sit for a while before saying, "Let's get back to it, Theo. The council's not going to wait forever."

I pushed myself off the window and sighed. "All right, I'll be there. But I swear, if I hear one more argument about the tax rates, I might lose it."

Amadeus smiled as we made our way out the door. "You and me both."

We walked in silence to the council chamber. I glanced at Amadeus from the corner of my eye. He carried himself with the same quiet confidence he always had. His bow was slung over his shoulder as though we were marching into battle rather than a simple meeting full of invective mouths. In some ways, I supposed it wasn't all that different.

"Do you ever get tired of this?" I asked softly.

"It isn't about what I feel or think, Theo. It's about what needs to be done."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I've got, and it's the same answer I've been

giving you since I met you."

"Yeah, you'd think I would've learned by now."

He gave me a rather unimpressed look. "You'd think."

I rolled my eyes and said nothing else on the matter, and neither did the archer, which I was appreciative of. As we rounded the corner, the chamber came into my view. The voices inside were muffled but growing louder with every unfortunate step I took, and I say unfortunate because it was unfortunate that I was taking them. I could practically feel the tension seeping through the heavy wooden doors. I stood just short of entering.

Amadeus lifted an eyebrow. "Are you going to join the meeting or are you going to keep standing there like an idiot?"

I glared at the man. "You could work on your encouragement skills, Amadeus."

"Theo, are you, or aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming."

I pushed the door open and the noise drew a long sigh from me. Half the council was already arguing, voices raised, hands gesturing wildly. I doubt they even knew what they were saying. It was the same scene I had left behind, as though I'd never been gone.

"Your Majesty," Lord Bannon's voice rang out, overly formal. "We were just discussing—"

"Taxes," I finished for him. "Of course you were."

"Among other matters," he said a little defensively.

I ignored him and scanned the room, noting the familiar faces. Lord Bannon, always eager to make himself heard. Lady Eleanor, her hands folded neatly, observing the chaos with a calm gaze. There was Lord Roth, looking half-asleep. Toombai, of course, standing rather than sitting. Wallace was there. It seemed wrong without my head of council there though. Ambrose was a dear friend of mine, and it was unfavorable that he was still away in Lirvanth doing what he could for the people. At least Isaiah was there with him, or maybe that was a bad thing. The two did like to argue about everything, no matter how small. In any case, it made me glad to know that he wasn't alone. I wondered if Amadeus had ever gotten around to asking them for reports . . .

I cleared my throat. "Let's make this quick. I'm not in the mood for another roundabout parley."

"King Theophilus," Bannon began yet again, "the treasury—"

"Isn't as empty as you all like to pretend," I cut him off. "We've been over this. Twice."

"But if we—"

"We're not raising the taxes again. The people cannot take it. I will not allow it."

There was a murmur of discontent among the members of my council, though no one dared to speak against me. I was already in a lousy mood and none of them were brave enough. Yet, anyway.

"Then what do you propose, my king?" Lady Elanor asked.

"I'm working on it."

"That isn't good enough. The kingdom needs answers, sire. Soon."

"I am aware of that," I muttered. "Very aware."

There was silence, heavy and awkward. I could feel their eyes on me, waiting for me to magically have all the answers. For me to be the king they expected, but I wasn't sure I could be that. Not anymore.

"Perhaps the solution lies not in what we have but in what we can gain," Amadeus suggested from his seat beside me.

All eyes turned to him. I winced, already knowing what was coming before he said anything more. "What do you suggest?"

"A new alliance. One that could make things easier."

I frowned and closed my eyes briefly. "With whom?"

"Veeran."

The room fell silent as death, every eye on me except Toombai's. He was narrowing his eyes at my warden.

"Veeran?" I echoed. "You're serious?"

"Deadly," Amadeus said. "Consider it, Theo. They have grain, and trading routes. We could easily trade with them and make things better for everyone."

I wanted to pull the man aside and ask what in all of Feruneth he thought he was doing. He knew as well as I did that if I went to Veeran, I would probably die there. Toombai had made that clear enough. He was more than willing to murder me. I kept my expression blank, though I could feel the tension in the room pressing down on me. The chamber now felt as still as the gardens right outside.

"Toombai," I said slowly, deliberately. I didn't bother hiding my displeasure. "What are your thoughts?"

He didn't answer immediately. He was watching Amadeus rather than me, and there was no mistaking the contempt simmering beneath his stare. When he finally did speak, his tone was clipped, edged with barely concealed hatred.

"I think," he said, "that an alliance with Veeran would be a *grave* mistake."

"Of course you do," I muttered. I turned my attention back to Amadeus. "You couldn't have suggested anything more reasonable?"

"Veeran has what we need. Your people need food, Veeran has that. It would make things in Lirvanth better too, if you gave them food. You can't keep ignoring this."

"I'm not ignoring it," I hissed. "I'm trying to avoid getting myself killed."

"Then perhaps," Toombai cut in, "you should consider staying out of Veeran altogether."

I turned to him fully. "And let my people starve while I cower in my castle?"

"Better a starving king than a dead one."

I arched an eyebrow. "Is that concern I hear? I didn't think you cared that much."

"I don't. What I care about is keeping Feruneth from being dragged into another war because of your recklessness."

"I am trying to keep this kingdom afloat while half the council wants to bleed the people dry. But go ahead, tell me again how I'm the reckless one."

His jaw clenched, his hand drifting toward the hilt of his sword.

"Don't," Amadeus warned.

Toombai's fingers curled around the hilt anyway. He didn't draw, not yet, but the threat was there.

"You wouldn't," I said, deadly calm.

"Wouldn't I?"

"Not here. Not in my castle."

His grip tightened briefly before he let out a low growl and released it. "You're a fool, Theophilus," he muttered. "A reckless, blind fool."

I didn't respond. I just watched as he turned on his heel and strode out of the chamber, his footsteps fading down the hall like a distant drumbeat.

"Pleasant," I said under my breath.

When my warden said nothing, I wasted no time taking him by the arm and pulling him out of the council chamber, out of earshot. I turned to him, saw his calm expression, and scowled.

"Don't," I warned, pointing a finger at him.

"Don't what?"

"Don't give me that look. You knew *exactly* how he would

react."

"I did."

"And you suggested it anyway?"

"Because it's the right move. It's the smartest thing to do."

"For whom?" I demanded. "Certainly not for me. You know as well as I do that if I set foot in Veeran, I won't make it out alive."

"You don't have to go to Veeran yourself, Theo." I hated the reason I heard in his tone. "You can send an envoy. Negotiate terms. There are ways to handle this without putting yourself in danger."

"Ways that involve trusting Toombai not to put a knife in my back the minute I turn around?"

He nodded. "If you take the right precautions."

"Precautions? Amadeus, this is Toombai we're talking about. There's no such thing as 'precautions' when it comes to him. The man hates me far than he ever hated my father."

"You're thinking like a man under siege," Amadeus said quietly.

I paused. "What did you say?"

"You're thinking like a man under siege," he repeated, his voice softer now. "Always on the defensive. Always expecting the worst." I opened my mouth to argue, but the words died on my tongue. "I know you're trying to protect Feruneth, but a kingdom cannot survive if its king is too afraid to take a step forward."

I turned away, my jaw tight as I stared at the stone wall. I sighed. "You aren't wrong," I finally admitted.

"Then stop acting like you're fighting a losing battle. You aren't, Theo. Not yet."

"Perhaps not, but it's starting to feel like one." I didn't speak for a long moment, letting the weight of Amadeus's words settle around me. I ran a hand down my face, exhaling slowly as I tried to piece together a solution that didn't end with a knife in my back, or worse, a war I couldn't win. "You're right."

Amadeus smiled "I usually am."

I shot him a look, but there wasn't any real heat behind it. "Don't push it."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he said.

I turned away. "We can't ignore Veeran," I said. "But I am not going." When Amadeus said nothing, I continued. "Wallace." I turned back to my warden. "He can go. Send for him."

"Are you sure?"

"Do you know anyone better?"

He cleared his throat. "Either Ambrose or Isaiah. Or . . ."

I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

Amadeus didn't flinch. He never did. He stood there, steady as ever, with that maddeningly patient look in his eyes. He was about to suggest something that would drive me insane. "Theo—"

"No." I cut him off before he could say another word. "Don't even start."

"You haven't heard what I'm going to say."

"I don't need to." I gestured vaguely toward him, exasperation dripping from my voice. "I already know what it is. You think *you* should go."

"And why shouldn't I?"

"Why shouldn't you? Because it's a terrible idea, that's why."

"Terrible? I'm the most capable man you have, Theo."

"I know that," I snapped, running a hand through my hair. "But that's exactly the issue. You're the most capable man I have, and I need you *here*."

"You'll survive without me for a few weeks."

"Will I?" I laughed humorlessly. "Because last I checked, Feruneth is barely holding itself together, and I can't hold it together without you. You leave, and I'm left with a council that wants to strangle me, nobles who would sell me to the highest bidder, and Toombai breathing down my neck from across the border."

He didn't respond right away, which was never a good sign. It meant he was thinking, weighing things the way only he could. I hated when he did that because it typically meant I was about to lose the argument. "Theo," he said, his voice gentler now. "You're stronger than you think. You don't need me here to keep Feruneth together."

I took a sharp breath before I said anything I might later regret. "That isn't the point," I muttered.

"Then what *is* the point?"

How was I supposed to explain it? It wasn't just about needing him to keep the kingdom together. It was about needing him *here*. Where I could trust that he was safe. That he wasn't walking straight into the jaws of Veeran where Toombai would slit his throat without a second thought. I'd already lost one father, and I doubted how I would handle losing another. "It isn't worth the risk," I finally said.

"Wallace, in the short time he's been here, has proven to be a good man, Theo, but he's not me. If things go wrong, and they might, he won't get out of there alive."

I clenched my jaw, refusing to look at him. "And if you go? What happens if things go wrong then?"

"Then I'll get out."

"You can't promise that."

"I can."

I closed my eyes briefly and finally turned to look at him, really look at him. My frustration was gone, replaced with something akin to fear. "Amadeus . . ."

"I've been through worse. You know I have."

"That isn't the point," I repeated. "I can't lose you too."

Amadeus gave me a brief, tired smile. "You won't."

"That is a promise you cannot keep, my friend."

"This is not about promises, Theo. It's about what needs to be done."

I shook my head. "Wallace can do this. He's more diplomatic. He knows how to handle these situations without making things worse."

"Yes, he is a good diplomat, but Veeran isn't going to play fair. You know that. Toombai won't make this easy, and Wallace doesn't know how to navigate those waters like I do."

I knew he was right. Damn it, I *knew*, but knowing did not make it one bit easier. "I can't let you go."

"Theo, my king . . . I'm not asking for permission," he said softly.

My head snapped toward him, and I saw in his eyes something that made my blood run cold. Determination, sure. More than that though, there was resignation.

"Amadeus . . . Please."

"Three days. If Wallace does not make it back in time, in three days, I'm going. I won't sit here while you gamble Feruneth's future on chance."

Here I foolishly thought this was about trading for grain, for more food to feed the people. I opened my mouth to argue with him, to change his mind, but nothing came out. Deep down, I knew he wasn't going to budge. Worse than that, I knew he was right. Undeniably correct about all of it. Three days. I prayed that Wallace would come back after three days with good news, return at all for that matter. Three days were all I had, and I hated every second of it.

It sounded like both a lifetime and no time at all. I had three days to convince myself that Wallace would succeed, that I would not have to watch Amadeus walk into the lion's den, that Feruneth wouldn't fall apart in my absence of answers.

I didn't say anything else. There was nothing to say. We both knew where this was going. I simply nodded, and Amadeus, ever the practical one, left me standing there. He didn't wait for an argument I couldn't give, and I didn't stop him because I didn't trust myself to speak without sounding like a desperate fool.

The silence that followed was louder than any council chamber. I stood there a while after he was gone, staring at the stone wall as though it might suddenly offer me wisdom. Spoiler: It didn't. The only thing it gave me was a headache, and the longer I stood there, the worse the ache became. I was tired. Bone-weary in a way that sleep would never fix.

Eventually, I forced myself to move, dragging my feet down the hall like a man sentenced to this execution. The corridors were quiet, as usual. Most of the servants had long since retired. I had great distaste for quiet. Silence was never a good thing in a place like my castle. It meant people were either scheming or too afraid to speak. Neither option boded well.

By the time I reached my chambers, I was ready to collapse, but sleep wasn't about to come anytime soon. I knew that much. My mind was far from restful. Every thought was an enemy who refused to surrender. I paced. Back and forth, back and forth, like a caged animal. Just three days.

"Quit thinking about it," I muttered to myself. Of course, that only made me think about it more. Excellent strategy, I know. Truly brilliant.

I tried distracting myself. I pulled a book from the shelf and flipped through the pages, but I couldn't focus. The words blurred together, the lines meaning nothing. I laid it aside, pouring myself a glass of wine instead. It tasted like ash on my tongue. I dumped that out and set it aside as well. I sat. I stood. I paced endlessly. I even considered going back to the council chamber just to have something, *anything*, to do, but even I wasn't that desperate.

Then I did something utterly foolish. I went to the map Amadeus and I had spread out on the table a little while earlier. It detailed Feruneth and every surrounding city in my country, including Veeran. My eyes drifted toward that cursed land, and I traced the border with my finger absently. Veeran was more than an enemy. It was a threat that refused to die, or rather, it could *become* a threat. Now Amadeus wanted to waltz straight into its jaws like it was a pleasant afternoon stroll.

"Idiot," I muttered, though I wasn't sure whether I meant him,

myself, or both.

My mind conjured scenarios faster than I could dismiss them. Wallace, captured. Amadeus, betrayed. A war igniting over a single misstep. Through it all, Toombai would be smiling like a vulture circling a dying beast. I slammed my hand down on the table, hard enough to make the inkwell jump. The frustration didn't leave my heart. It simmered, boiling right beneath the surface. I was trapped, hemmed in by choices I did not wish to make and consequences I was not prepared to face.

What was I supposed to do? Pray? Hope that Wallace's diplomacy would somehow charm a man who would sooner stab him than speak to him? Hope that Amadeus, if it came to that, wouldn't meet the same fate? I couldn't. I had learned long ago that hope was a luxury I could never afford. Feruneth, though? My people? They didn't have that same privilege.

I exhaled slowly, forcing the tension out of my jaw lest my teeth crack. I had three days to prepare for whatever came next. To be ready for whatever happened when Wallace was sent away and came back . . . Or didn't.

I straightened, eyes still on the map. If Toombai wanted a fight, I could arrange that. In time. For now, I needed to stay at the castle and make myself useful.

I turned away from the map with heavy shoulders. I was exhausted, but my brain wouldn't stop thinking. Still, I moved toward the bed, if only to pretend I could rest. As I lay there, staring up at the ceiling blankly, my thoughts still did not hush. Perhaps I *was* thinking like a man under siege. Sometimes, though, the only way to survive the siege was to outlast it. That was exactly what I intended to do.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I didn't get much sleep. No surprise there. Morning brought with it a headache that felt like someone had taken a hammer to my skull. I was already in a foul mood when Wallace showed up, which was unfortunate for him. He and Amadeus arrived together, both looking far too awake foy my liking. Wallace, ever composed, stood just inside the door. My warden, on the other hand, leaned casually against the wall, arms crossed. Then there was Seabert. He stood just behind them, looking both amused and unimpressed simultaneously. It was the look I'd come to associate with him.

Wonderful. Everyone was there.

"Wallace," I said, standing to at least greet them properly. "Come in."

He stepped forward and offered a bow. "King Theophilus."

I didn't bother with such pleasantries. "You're going to Veeran."

Wallace blinked, but to his credit, he didn't look surprised. "When?"

"Immediately. The sooner, the better. I need you to open negotiations. Grain. Trade routes. Anything that will stop my council from bleeding the people dry."

"I see. And Toombai?"

"Handle him carefully. He's waiting for an opportunity to spill blood, so don't give him one. Best not to mention my name either."

"Understood."

"I need you back in three days. No more."

"I'll do what I can, my king."

"I know you will, Wallace. Thank you. You leave before noon."

"Yes, of course." He inclined his head and turned to leave, the door shutting softly behind him.

I could feel my warden's gaze burning into my skull, so I turned to him. "Yes?"

"Three days isn't enough time."

"It's all the time he has."

"Why, Theo? Why are you doing this?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Because it's the only option I have."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is."

"Damn you, Theo! Wallace doesn't know Veeran the way I do. He's not prepared for what Toombai is capable of."

"Toombai won't hurt him, he only wants to hurt me. And

besides, it's not like anyone knows it better than I do, but I'm not going because I'll get killed. Wallace knows diplomacy. He can handle it."

"Diplomacy won't save him if Toombai decides he's expendable."

"Then I'll deal with it if it comes to that."

"Deal with it? How, Theo? By sending another envoy? By throwing another man to the wolves and hoping they don't tear him apart?"

"Stop."

"No, I won't. You're gambling with his life."

"I'm trying to prevent another war."

"At what cost?"

"Whatever it takes."

"Even Wallace?" His voice was quieter now. I didn't answer. I couldn't. "You're making a mistake, Theo."

"I am making the only choice I have," I muttered.

"No, you aren't. You're scared."

"Scared? You think I'm scared?"

"I know you are."

"Of what, Amadeus? Tell me. What am I so scared of?"

"Losing."

"Losing? I've already lost more than you can imagine. My father. My sister. My—" I stopped myself, turning away.

"Me," he said softly. "Theo, I know that's what this is about. You aren't sending Wallace because you think he's the best choice. You're sending him because you're terrified of losing me."

"Don't," I warned.

"It's the truth, my king."

"Please, don't."

"You think keeping me here keeps me safe."

"Stop it, Amadeus."

"It doesn't, Theo. It never does, and it never will."

Seabert spoke for the first time since all of this, making me pause before throttling Amadeus. "Well, this is going splendidly."

"Not. Now."

"Perhaps this is not the best way to solve this, Theophilus."

"Seabert, enough," I mumbled.

"You want my advice or not?"

"No."

"Too bad. You need another safeguard, my king."

"Safeguard?" I asked warily.

"Send me with Wallace."

That caught me off guard. "What?"

"I'll go. Veeran's dangerous, and Wallace isn't prepared for what might happen if things go south. You need someone who knows how to get out alive."

I blinked at him. "You want to go?"

"Not particularly. I'd rather go myself than clean up whatever mess happens if things go wrong though."

I looked at Amadeus. "Did you put him up to this?"

"Nope."

"Yes," Seabert said at the same time.

Amadeus shrugged. "I might've mentioned it. He offered."

"Of course, he did. And I'm assuming you think this is a good idea?"

"I do."

"Fantastic." I sighed. "Fine. Bert goes."

"Good," he replied.

"I'm going to regret this."

"Likely."

I waved a hand at them both, tired of the whole conversation. "All right, that's enough for now. Bert, make sure Wallace doesn't get himself killed, will you? And Amadeus—" I paused, the words catching in my throat. I'd meant to send him away too, but I couldn't. Not this time. "Actually, Amadeus, stay a moment."

Seabert left after giving me strict instructions to take the antidote he'd left in my chambers, and I turned my full attention to Amadeus. "Look, I've been nothing short of a jerk lately. I've been stubborn, wrong, and I know it. You've been right more often than I've given you credit for. I have treated you like you don't know what you're talking about, and I have pushed you when I shouldn't have. You were right about Veeran, about Toombai, about . . . A lot of things. I have been acting out of fear, not logic, and that's my fault. I'm sorry, Amadeus. If you can't forgive me, fine, but I am sorry. I haven't been in my right mind lately."

He smiled briefly. "I know, my king. I won't hold it against you. You're a good man, and I know you mean well. You just need to improve your listening skills. A ton." He put his hand on my shoulder. "You ought to get some rest, real rest. And don't forget to take the antidote Seabert left for you."

"I won't, but you know rest isn't going to happen."

"I know, but I'll still say it."

I smiled briefly. “Thank you, my friend. I will see you at a later date.”

He nodded and walked away, leaving me to my own devices. Sleep didn’t come, as it never did. I was exhausted, and soon I was sure I would be tired enough to sleep no matter where I was. No matter that my thoughts chased themselves in circles. No matter that Wallace and Seabert had probably left for Veeran already. No matter that I had no doubt Amadeus was somewhere, pacing a hole into the floor, muttering about my idiocy. Perhaps he wasn’t wrong, but I would not send him unless I had to.

It was already bad enough I had sent Bert and Wallace to a place that wanted my death. There were some days when I was able to better ignore those kinds of decisions; that day was not one of those times. It was far from it. I thought about it more than ever.

I glanced at the vial Seabert had left for me several days ago and reluctantly swallowed its contents, bitter as they were.

I shifted my gaze to the window, noticing that the sun was high in the sky, evening coming gradually. That meant another day, another set of problems. I made myself sit up, pushing aside those less than joyful thoughts. My chambers were cold, and I shivered. Whether it was from the air or the ever-present sense of dread, I couldn’t say. I had half a mind to collapse onto the mattress and pretend, just for a moment, that none of this was my problem. What a miraculous thing that would be. My life would be infinitely simpler as a baker. I mean, that’s just the truth. Tragically, that was not how the world worked.

I was distracted from my thoughts when Amadeus knocked at the door. I rolled my eyes. He came way too often. “Amadeus, if you’re here to tell me I look awful, I already know.”

There was silence on the other side of the door. “It isn’t Amadeus, sire.”

I frowned before pulling the door open. One of my servants stood there, looking deeply uncomfortable. That was never a good sign in my line of work.

“My king,” he began, wringing his hands. “There’s been . . . An issue.”

It was inevitable, I supposed. Things could never go smoothly. It must have been decided long ago that I would never have peace or a good amount of sleep. I took a long breath. “Of course there has.”

The servant hesitated, clearly unsure if he should be proceeding or waiting for me to ask. I did not bother with either. “Just tell me.”

"It's about the council."

Always the council. If ever there was a group of men more determined to make my life miserable, I had yet to meet them. "What have they done now?"

"There's been a motion."

"A motion." I repeated flatly.

"Yes, my king. A motion to, well, to limit certain executive decisions regarding foreign negotiations."

I stared at him, waiting for those words to rearrange themselves into something much less irritating. They did not. "They're trying to strip my authority." It wasn't a question, nor did it need to be.

The advisor at least had the good sense to wince. "They are . . . Concerned, my king."

"They are, are they."

"Yes."

"Concerned that I might try to prevent them from taxing the people into starvation?"

". . . Essentially."

Delightful. I closed my eyes briefly, inhaling through my nose, summoning every ounce of patience I did not possess. This was the last thing I needed. I hadn't even had dinner, and already I was informed that my own council was attempting to undermine my authority. Again. I was the king, for heaven's sake. It was my right to make such decisions.

"What, exactly, does this motion entail?" I kept my voice level, but only just.

The advisor took a careful step back. "It would require all foreign agreements to be approved by the full council before any action is taken."

"You mean to tell me that in the event of, say, an impending famine, I would need to sit around waiting for a group of squabbling bureaucrats to come to a consensus before I could do anything about it?"

"That is the intention, yes."

I was going to strangle them. Every last one of them. I tried hard to will the urge to commit treason against my own government to subside. It did no such thing. "And let me guess, this motion conveniently excludes them from any responsibility should their delays result in catastrophe?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"How wonderful," I muttered, breathing a few curses under my breath. This was for power, plain and simple. They were testing how far they could push before I snapped. The worst part? I couldn't say I was surprised. I should have seen this coming sooner. I should have anticipated it the moment I sent Wallace with Seabert to Veeran. The council had never liked it when I made decisions without consulting them first, especially when it came to the wealth of Feruneth. They didn't care about the people, not really. They cared about keeping their own pockets lined with gold, their own influence intact. Now, they wanted to make sure I couldn't interfere. Fantastic, just fantastic.

I fixed the servant with a look that had sent men twice his size scurrying. "Tell the council I will meet with them before midnight. And tell them that if they think they can strip me of my authority, they are gravely mistaken."

He nodded quickly. "Absolutely, my king." He bowed, then practically fled.

I sighed deeply. It was too late for this. I should have stayed in bed, but I did not. Instead, I found myself pacing the length of my chambers, hands clasped behind my back, thoughts circling like buzzards over a carcass. The council knew exactly what they were doing. They were waiting to see if I would blink first, if I would concede, if I would roll over and let them take control while I played the role of a powerless figurehead. They would be sorely disappointed.

Still, it would have been easier if I had someone on my side besides Amadeus here with me. Too bad Wallace and Bert were halfway to Veeran by now, leaving me to deal with this nest of vipers alone. Amadeus was better suited for cutting throats than making speeches. Lectures he could do, but not speeches. His solution would involve fire, which, while tempting, wouldn't be much help.

I didn't walk toward the council. I turned toward the dining hall, feeling the eyes of the palace staff lingering on me as I walked past. They were always watching, always whispering, measuring the state of the kingdom by the set of my shoulders. I did my best not to look like a man on the verge of killing his own council.

By the time I arrived, most of the staff had already eaten and gone. That was good. The last thing I needed was some overeager lord cornering me before I'd had my first bite of bread.

I took my usual seat at the long table, and it was mere minutes before a plate was set before me. There was fresh bread, cheese, fruit,

and something that might have once been meat but now resembled an overcooked tragedy. I stared at it for a long moment before resigning myself to my fate. I'd suffered worse. I was halfway through a particularly dry piece of bread when a shadow fell across the table. I didn't bother looking up.

"Find a more productive pastime than criticizing my eating habits."

A chair scraped against the floor as Amadeus sat across from me, completely at ease. "I was actually going to say you look like you're planning to set something ablaze."

I swallowed my bite. "Not something. Someone."

"Ah." He leaned back, crossing his arms. "The council?"

"Naturally." I picked up a piece of fruit and turned it over in my hands. "They've decided I should not be allowed to make foreign agreements without their approval."

Amadeus exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "Greed."

"Clearly."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Meet with them before midnight. Explain, politely, why they're all idiots and dead wrong."

"Politely?"

"My version of polite."

"So, with veiled threats and thinly disguised contempt, then."

I took a bite of the fruit. "More or less."

"You should eat the rest of that."

I eyed the remaining food. The meat, still deeply untrustworthy, sat untouched. "I'll survive."

I finished the food I was brave enough to eat and followed my warden to the council chamber. It reeked of arrogance. I noticed the absence of Toombai in the room, which concerned me greatly.

Lord Bannon spoke the moment I sat down. "This is not an attempt to undermine your authority, my king. It is merely a precaution. A necessary measure to ensure the stability of our foreign relations."

I stared at him. "A precaution."

"Indeed. A king is many things, but he is not infallible. It is our duty to support you, to guide decisions that affect the kingdom as a whole. That is all we propose."

"What you propose is to strip me of my authority. To take my power and divide it among yourselves, as if I were some ornamental figurehead to be paraded when it suits you."

A few of them had the decency to look uncomfortable. Not Bannon. He was too practiced, too accustomed to the game. "My king, we only seek to protect the kingdom. We are stronger together than—"

"Enough." I stood slowly, my patience all but gone. I had tolerated their posturing, their endless maneuvering, but I was finished. "You have all overstepped, and as of this moment—"

The doors burst open, and every head turned. A servant stumbled inside, breathless, his face a shade too close to gray. His tunic was rumpled, as though he had run the length of the palace without stopping.

"My king, there's news," he said shakily. "From Veeran." He swallowed thickly. "Wallace is dead."

I did not move, didn't take a breath. He was dead. Wallace was dead. There was a ringing in my ears, a distant, hollow sound. I barely heard the servant stammer something about an ambush, about Veeran's treachery, about blood in the dirt. I had sent him. I had asked him to go. I had—

Amadeus was beside me before I had even realized he'd moved. His hand found my arm, steadying as ever. "I'll go."

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head before the thought could take root. "No, you will not."

"Theo."

"No."

He released a slow breath. "You know I have to."

"I know you think you have to, but I will not send you into the same grave Wallace just filled."

"Then who? Who else knows Veeran like I do? The way you told me? Who else can survive it? Seabert is still there, Theo. Maybe still alive." I turned away, jaw clenched so tightly it ached. "I'm not Wallace. I know what Toombai is capable of. I know what Veeran is." He paused briefly. "And I know what losing me would do to you."

I sighed. He wasn't wrong, but I had already lost too much. I pressed a hand over my eyes, willing away the burning behind them. "I should have gone myself," I muttered.

"You would have died," Amadeus said.

"Perhaps."

"You're not the only one who gets to make sacrifices, Theo."

I dropped my hand and met his gaze. God help me, I knew I was going to lose this fight. I was going to lose more than my heart could take. Rather than address Amadeus again, I turned back to the

council. "As I was saying before we were interrupted, you are all relieved of your duties to me, to Feruneth, and as a part of this council. Get out of my castle and don't come back. Good day to you all."

They had barely digested my words when the door slammed open, yet again. Every person in that room froze where they sat or where they stood. Seabert stumbled in, bloodied and breathing shallow. His face, normally impervious to pain or much emotion, was pale, twisted with something far worse than simple exhaustion.

I ignored the council's, the *former* council's, shocked murmurs. "Seabert," I said sharply, moving toward him. "What happened?"

He tried to speak, but the words came out in a painful rasp. His knees buckled, and he collapsed forward onto the stone floor with a sickening thud. Blood stained his tunic, a deep crimson that made my stomach lurch.

"Wallace . . ." he whispered. "Ambushed. Too late . . . Wallace is dead."

Yes, I knew that. "Seabert, no. Please, no." I knelt beside him.

"Toombai." He coughed. "Toombai . . . I couldn't get to him in time."

"Don't talk," I ordered. "I'll get help. You'll make it, Bert. Please."

His cracked smile was nothing short of painful to witness. "Not long . . . Left, Theo. Sorry. I couldn't . . . Couldn't save him . . ."

Seabert's breath caught, then slowed, his body going still. The silence in the room was deafening, oppressive. I stared at him for a moment, everything settling deep inside me. Wallace was dead. Seabert was dead. Everyone I knew, my friends, my sister, my family, every person I loved was dying. And it was all Wisteria's fault, or whatever insolent idiot she had fallen in love with. Whomever that man was, I would kill him.

I couldn't keep holding this kingdom together with empty words and promises no one seemed to believe anymore. It wasn't working. It never worked. Feruneth was a lost cause.

I felt the frustration building up, the council's faces blurring in the background. I didn't care about them. They could go rot for all I cared. I wasn't sure I cared about anything anymore.

Amadeus knelt beside me, beside Seabert's motionless body. "You need to let me go to Veeran," he said quietly, but certain.

I turned on him before I even thought about it. "No."

"Listen, Theo—"

"No. I'm not having this conversation again."

Amadeus's words were unyielding. "You don't have a choice. Wallace is dead, Seabert's dead, and you're next if you don't act now."

"Don't you dare," I snapped. "Don't you dare try to tell me what I need to do. I've already lost two men—two good men—and I'm not sending you to follow them."

"Then what, Theo? You're just going to sit here and wait for Veeran to burn everything down? Wait for them to come for you too?" I didn't answer. "Theo," he said, softer now. "You've always known this moment would come. You know what Toombai is trying to do. You know that if you don't do something, or let me do something, more people are going to die. More than just Wallace and Seabert. More than your sister and Wisteria."

"I can't—" I shook my head. "I can't lose you too. Not you, Amadeus."

"Well, you're going to have to get over that."

"Damn it, Amadeus! You don't get it!" I turned to the council, who were foolish enough to still be in the room. "All of you, get out. Right now." They listened this time. I waited until I was left with my warden and Bert's body. I spoke quieter now. "I have already lost everything, and now you want to throw yourself into the fire as well?" I felt the tears in my eyes, but I didn't brush them away. "You think I don't know what I'm risking? Sending you to Veeran is like sending another to die in my place. It's cowardice, Amadeus."

"Maybe I'd rather be a coward than watch you lose more than you already have and still do nothing."

I wanted to scream at him, to throw something, break something, anything to rid myself of this entire situation. Instead, I looked at him and whispered, "Fine. Go to Lirvanth first. Take Isaiah and Ambrose with you. Take as many guards as you need." He nodded, turned to leave, and didn't say anything. There was nothing left to say, not really, except one small thing. I caught his arm as he walked past me. "Don't get yourself killed, Amadeus, *please*."

He smiled sadly, tiredly. "No promises." Then he was gone.

My parents' old room was dim when I walked inside. The only light was from a solitary candle flickering on the desk, its flame dancing in the stillness. I sat at the table, papers strewn across it in disarray. They were all important, yet none held answers.

I was meant to be making decisions. Decisions to secure this kingdom, decisions to prevent it from falling apart, but no decision seemed right. They were utterly useless in the grand scheme of

things. No decision I could make mattered when everyone was dead, except for three people. I had three people left, and that was it. If they all died, I wasn't sure I wanted the stupid throne anymore. I wasn't sure I'd ever wanted it. It had been an obligation, that was all.

At least I still had Isaiah, Ambrose, and Amadeus. They were still alive, for now. Too bad the one I trusted most, the one I counted on for everything, was about to walk into the heart of the enemy's den. I had been dumb enough to let him, naïve enough to stop arguing and just let him do what he wanted, no matter if it would break my heart to pieces or not.

The sound of footsteps sounded in the throne room, outside my door, soft and deliberate. I would've thought Amadeus was gone already. Apparently, he still had a few things to say.

"Theo," he said when he stepped inside.

I didn't have the energy to be angry with him anymore, only concerned. I looked up from the papers and saw him standing there in the doorway. "Amadeus."

"I thought you'd be here." He walked inside and sat down across from me. "I wanted to talk before I left." I didn't respond. I didn't want to hear what he had to say. Not with all the things in my head. He didn't wait for me to ask though. "It's about her."

I winced briefly, knowing he meant Ria. I had nearly forgotten about her, if only for a moment. I couldn't help but look away. "I know what you're going to say," I muttered. "You think whoever she loved is behind all of this."

"Yes, I do. He is behind everything. Lici, Seabert, Wallace. Probably the reason your parents were killed. He wanted you on the throne, Theo."

"I know that. I want to know *why*."

His expression softened. "He wants you to suffer, Theo. He wants to break you, destroy you. Probably because he wants what you have, and he wants to make you hand it to him. He wants you to fold and give him everything you never wanted. I think what he really wants more than anything, Theo, is to *be* you."

I frowned. "Well, he sounds like a crazy person. You know who it is?" I hated that I could not keep the desperation from my voice.

"I do not, but I will, and I'll let you know."

I rubbed my eyes and finally looked back at him. "Amadeus, don't go, please," I pleaded. "Not after all of this. Not with everything at risk. You don't know what you're walking into. You're going straight into their hands. They'll use you like they used Wallace.

They'll—"

"You're wrong. I'm not like Wallace. I know how to survive this."

"But Amadeus—" I paused. "Please, don't go. You're the only one that I really trust. If you leave, I'll lose everything, more than everything. I know that you could live if you wanted to, if you truly meant to survive, but I cannot bear the thought that you'll die in my place. Amadeus, if someone should go, it should be me. Toombai wants to kill me, or whoever this is. You don't have to get involved. Please, I'm begging you, my friend. Don't do this."

"Theo . . . I don't have a choice. You know that."

"I'll make a choice for you then. You can't go. I won't let you."

I saw a flicker of regret in his eyes, only for a brief second. "I'm going, Theo."

"Then at least wait until tomorrow at noon. Please, give me that."

I could sense his hesitation, but he must have seen the desperation in my eyes. "Very well. Tomorrow, no sooner than noon." He turned on his heel and left.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I left before dawn, before the sun had risen. No word to the council I no longer had, no message scrawled in trembling ink. Not even Amadeus knew. I couldn't face him, not after all we'd said. Not after I'd begged him, and he'd still disagreed and insisted on walking into the fire. Now there I was, doing exactly what I had implored him not to. Cowardice dressed as bravery. Or perhaps the other way around. It was getting harder to tell.

I took the back path from the palace. Through the orchard where Wisteria used to walk. Past the servants' halls, where Lici once stole fruit and gave it to me. Down the sloped fields and out through the border gate where once I'd ridden with my father before everything, too young to hold the reins but too proud to let go.

The grass was silver with melting frost, the wind sharp with slowly fading winter. Veeran's road welcomed me like an old enemy. It was familiar, cold, full of awful memories. I traveled light. No guards. No fanfare. No horse. Only the ache in my heart and the quiet hammering of regret.

By the time I reached the outskirts of the Veeran capital, I was already second-guessing, but doubt doesn't stop the march of feet. And pride, well, it has a habit of convincing you there's still a way to win even when the board's been set against you from the start. I crossed the Veeran threshold as though my presence still meant something. As though I hadn't been outmaneuvered at every turn. As though I still had a crown to my name and a kingdom to protect.

They let me in without question. Just like that. The gates opened wide. The guards didn't even blink. One of them bowed. Not to honor, but to mock me. I felt it in my gut; I knew it in my bones. Still, I walked.

The city was too quiet. No sounds of merchants. No laughter in the alleys. No hum of daily life. Only silence and shadow and a hundred unseen eyes watching me pass. They knew I was coming. I think they'd *always* known.

The Parliament doors yawned open like a mouth waiting to swallow me whole. I hesitated for the first time then, just one breath. Barely long enough to taste the rot in the air, the staleness of something old and planned, but I stepped inside anyway.

He was waiting for me. Toombai, draped in black, standing in the center of the hall as though he'd never moved since he arrived there. His posture was easy, hands behind his back, head slightly

inclined. He had no weapon in sight because the simple truth was that he didn't need one. He already knew how this would go.

I took one step toward him, and then it hit. Sharp and fast, from behind. I felt a boot to the back of my knee, a fist to my gut. I stumbled forward after another blow, felt something crack in my side. I gasped. Then came the floor, inviting me like an old friend. The kicks came after that, precise and methodical. They didn't want to kill me. They wanted to send a message.

Toombai never moved, never flinched. He only watched.

By the time they were done, I couldn't see straight. I tasted blood, warm and bitter. My ribs screamed with every breath, but I had felt that before. I had felt all this pain before, and yet it was worse the second time. It was worse because I didn't fight back, because I wasn't trying to stop them. I let it happen. I needed it to happen so I could meet the man Wisteria had loved. Though I suspected I already knew his face.

I didn't resist when they dragged me. I hadn't the strength left to fight, and even if I had . . . I don't know that I would've tried.

The cell was stone with rust and decay. They threw me in like a sack of meat. The door slammed shut behind me without any words, no gloating, just simple quiet. And pain.

A long time passed. Long enough for the pain to settle into something almost numb. Long enough for the room to blur at the edges. Long enough to start hearing things. Ghosts maybe, or worse: Memories. Wisteria's laugh, Wallace's voice, Seabert's last breath only hours before. Amadeus. Always Amadeus. His eyes when I told him no. His silence when I begged him not to go.

The ache there ran deeper than the bruises because I knew, *knew*, that if he was here with me, he would've been pulling me up off the ground like he always did, but I'd sent him to die, same as the rest. At least he would live until tomorrow afternoon. That had to count for something. At least I had come before him.

I rolled to my side, coughed blood into the dirt, and shut my eyes. Then I heard the footsteps. They were soft and even, controlled. Only one pair. My whole body stiffened, useless though it was. Whoever was coming did not need to speak to announce their authority. I knew it well.

The door creaked open, and light spilled in, amber and blood-red. It was the last kiss of sun slipping through the world. The figure stood in the center of it, shorter than me, shadowed against the glow.

I squinted, ignoring the thump in my head. He didn't speak, didn't move. He stood there watching me. There was something familiar in the way he held himself. In the shape of him, the cold patience of a man who had waited a long, long time for this exact moment. Someone I had called a friend once, but whom I scarcely knew now.

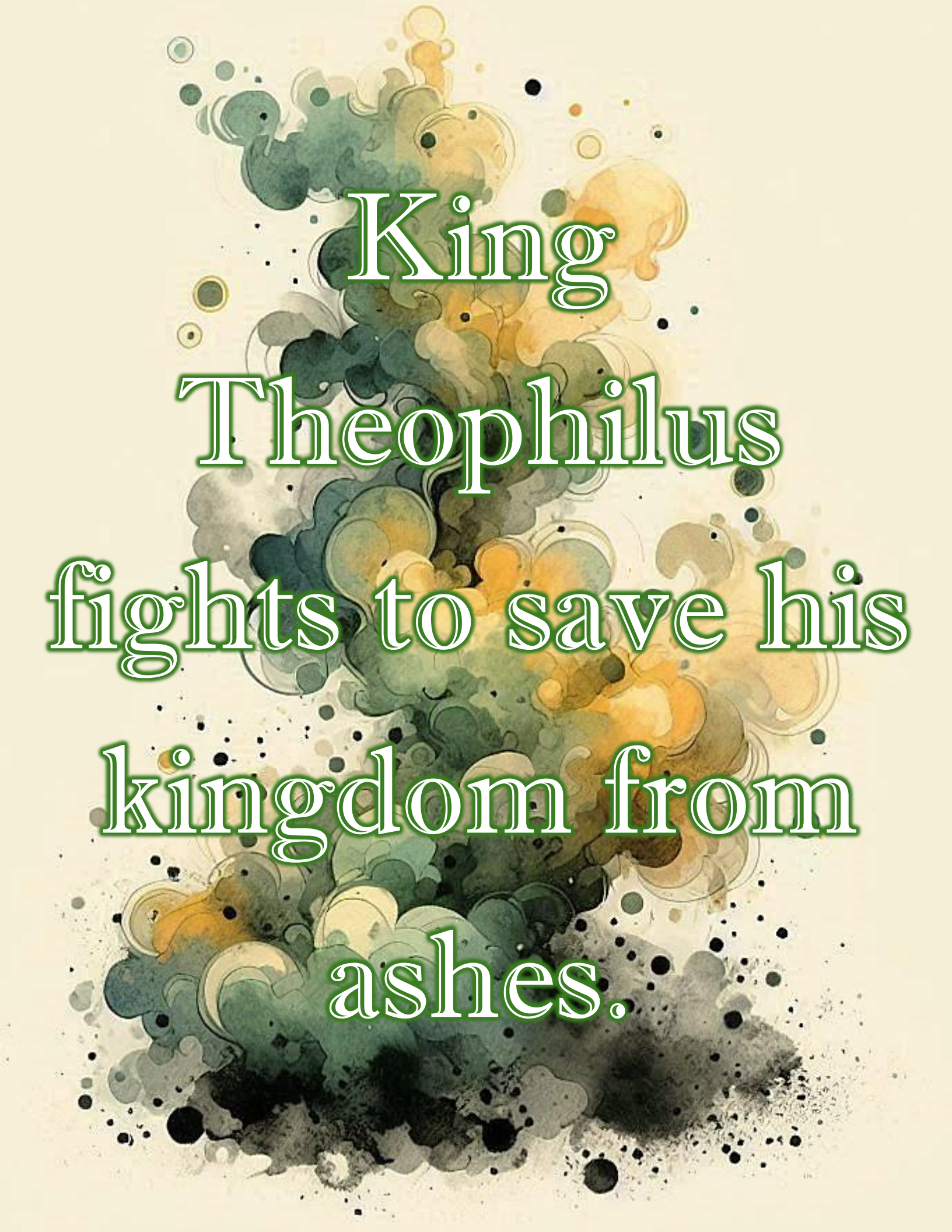
This was the man Wisteria had loved. Not me, but *him*. The one she would've betrayed a kingdom for. The one who whispered death into her ears while I planned a wedding. He was the one who had orchestrated all of this. Every loss, every death, every calculated blow. They were all his fault, and I was ashamed to have ever called him anything but a murderer.

He wanted everything I had, but he wanted it slowly, so I would feel it and so I would break. When he smiled, a sickening thing, something inside me broke then because I knew that smile. God help me, I *knew* him.

References

+Psalm 41:9 NKJV

●Proverbs 19:5 NKJV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